

# Four Quarters

VOL. 3, NO. 2  
Second Series

FALL, 1989  
Four Dollars

Special  
Irish  
Issue



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## Table of Contents

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### QUARTER NOTES

Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, <i>Politics on Bloomsday</i>	3-6
John P. McCarthy, <i>Irish-American Conservatives and the IRA</i>	6-8
Eileán Ní Chuilleanáin, "A Voice"	9
Medbh McGuckian, "The Boathouse"	10
Seamus Heaney, <i>Yeats' Nobility</i>	11-14
Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, <i>A Conversation with Eileán Ní Chuilleanáin</i>	15-19
Eithne Strong, "Bald"	20
Peter LaSalle, <i>The Door from Seven Eccles Street</i> (short story)	21-32
Hugh O'Donnell, "Lady in Waiting"	32
Brian Lennon, S.J., <i>A Matter of Perceptions: The Northern Conflict</i>	33-42
Leland Bardwell, "Them's Your Mother's Pills"	43-44
Aidan Higgins, <i>Two from Ronda Gorge</i>	45-54

## BOOKMARKS

John P. Rossi, review of Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Passion & Cunning: Essays on Nationalism, Terrorism, and Revolution* 55-57

Stephen P. Smith, review of Elmer Anders, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney* 57-58

John Keenan, *Paddy* (essay) 59-62

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63-64

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FOUR QUARTERS (ISSN-0015-9107) is published semiannually in the Spring and Fall by the faculty of La Salle University, Philadelphia, PA 19141. Four dollars per copy.

Subscriptions: \$8.00 for one year; \$13.00 for two years.

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Indexed in American Humanities Index and Index of American Periodical Verse.



# Quarter Notes

PATRICIA BOYLE HABERSTROH

## *Politics on Bloomsday*

Anyone who has read James Joyce's story, "Ivy Day in the Committee Room," has been exposed to the cynical view of politics dramatized by Ireland's most celebrated writer. What, we might wonder as we drift out of the '80s, would Joyce make of Irish politics today? Well, he would have had great material for fiction this year.

The summer of 1989 brought the Irish to the polls to select their members of the European Parliament. At the same time, they voted in a controversial and some say unnecessary national election, engineered by Charles Haughey (Charlie to the masses) to increase his Fianna Fail's majority in the Dail. Fine Gael, the other major party headed by Alan Dukes, planned to give Haughey et al a run for their money, and the minority parties jockeyed for position at the polls. Haughey failed, triggering a constitutional crisis and precipitating one of the more bizarre events in modern Irish politics—no official government in the Republic. Even the turf accountants offered odds on the outcome of this one.

To my mind, there is no small significance to the fact that election results were announced on Bloomsday, June 16, the anniversary of one of Ireland's great literary events: Leopold Bloom's tour of Dublin in Joyce's *Ulysses*. What Bloom would have made of the

all-day, all-night network coverage of the election returns is stuff for several novels. Radio Telefis Eireann's coverage, which involved 400 personnel, including 55 journalists and 7 broadcast centers, would have kept poor Leopold walking for several days beyond Bloomsday. Photo opportunities, number crunching, politico-babble and smile, smile, smile might have driven the poor man right into the polluted Liffey.

But what, we might ask in the spirit of James Joyce, did the average Irish voter think of this election? For that, we can turn to that venerable institution, the Irish press, where the opinions of Irish voters come through loud and clear. How about this letter to the editor of *The Irish Times*?

*Sir,— 4 million pounds worth of publicity has cluttered the lamp posts and clogged the letterboxes. The harbingers of one of nature's small miracles are here. Who cares how the brave salmon swims unswervingly to its native stream, or how the aerobatic swift wings mile after unerring mile through the skies, or, indeed, how the rain knows you are leaving work early today? All these feats of uncanny intuition pale beside the unhesitating certainty with which the Irish electorate can discriminate between the myriad candidates (who all look to me as if they had been sculpted out of the rice pudding of my childhood) and, once again, elect that most Irish of Irish institutions—the right-wing Catholic government of the people's choice.*

*Isn't nature wonderful — Yours, etc.*



## Quarter Notes

Rice pudding of his childhood, indeed! That's an image worthy of a poem or a novel—not to mention the salmon, the swift, or the intuitive rain that knows you got out of work early.

And look at what Mary Duffy of Galway writes to the editor—as cynical as Joyce ever was:

*Assuming, for a second, that there exists a number of voters who find little consolation in the philosophies of these two parties, what course of action should we adopt to assert our position? Should we bite the bullet and vote for the candidate who appalls us least, or is the only principled alternative to spoil our votes?*

*Either way and at best, it's one and a half cheers for democracy.*

"One and a half cheers"? —a bit stingy Mary might appear. However, Ronan Foster, Media Correspondent for *The Irish Times*, reports that democracy was under attack everywhere. He describes a controversial Fianna Fail ad in the *Cork Examiner*:

*Fianna Fail's achievements in several areas were recounted and the feature also carried an attack on the Left, saying its programme stank and forecasting a Tiananmen Square situation in this country if they were allowed to hold the balance of power.*

Stinking programs and leftist revolutionaries in Ireland?

The fictional possibilities, especially the plots, are getting better.

But lest we think that all of Ireland was tuned into this election, the newspapers certainly demonstrate otherwise. Ronan Foster reports in *The Irish Times* that Mary Harney, campaigning in the Liberties area of Dublin, was introduced as a contender for Europe. "Oh very good, what are you singing?" one shopper asked the startled candidate, (It should be noted that there is much interest in an event called the European Song Contest.) Foster suggests that the European issues are not those which Dublin's Southsiders care about. But Joyce? Well remember, he was a singer who maintained he gave up his singing career for writing. Don't think he wouldn't have picked up on this shopper and found a place for her in *Dubliners*.

And up in the hills of Donegal, as Breandan O hEithir reports in *The Irish Times*, politics certainly got put in its place. He describes Fianna Fail's headquarters in Letterkenney as like "the set for a film on an election campaign":

*Its walls are covered with lists of people who will put cars at the party's disposal today, areas that have been canvassed, maps and charts and enigmatic messages in Fianna Fail-speak.*

But what's going on around town? Well they've turned the television sets off in the pubs, except for sporting events, and talk centers on sheep on a local golf course and the rise of the American dollar. But the "big story" concerns Martin McHugh:



## Quarter Notes

*Martin McHugh, the county's best forward, has bought himself a pub in Killybegs. He decided to change its name and on Tuesday evening went to hang up the new sign. It slipped and fell on his shoulder and he was taken to Letterkenny Hospital.*

*The good news is that the injury was minor and that he will be able to play against Derry on Sunday.*

*The joke is that the name he has chosen for his pub is "Fawlty Towers."*

Alan Dukes and Charlie Haughey might be slugging it out in Dublin, but if the pub sign falls on Donegal's local football hero, that's real news. And the pub sign falling on the hero? Remember Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*? The hero of that story, a hod carrier, gets drunk, falls off a ladder and dies, only to rise again when one of the mourners spills whiskey on him at the wake. Think about this.

Back down closer to Dublin, in County Wicklow, J. O'Grady has another point of view. Writing to the editor of *The Irish Times*, O'Grady advises:

*Forget the politicians. Last weekend I discovered a marvelous and innovative way of solving both emigration and the energy crisis in one fell swoop, using only natural deposits from the sea-shore area.*

*My plan, as soon as I find a financial backer, is to establish a mega-factory by the water's edge at Little Bray, converting the floating human excrement to methane which, in turn, will run the*

*huge turbines necessary to recycle the discarded condoms and other items of a (female) personal nature which are freely to be found in the water and on the water's edge.*

*I believe such is the scope of my discovery that local councils ought to be involved—perhaps someone among your readership might propose the motion?*

No word from Ireland yet on whether anyone has picked up Mr. O'Grady's proposal.

But every story has to have a hero, and in this summer's election, neither Charlie nor Alan became one. Much to his own, and everyone else's, surprise, Roger Garland, the Green candidate, woke up on Bloomsday to find himself elected to the Dail. Where had this sleeping giant come from, everyone asked, as millions of journalists (well maybe 55) and television cameras descended on Roger's house where the soft-spoken, bespeckled, bearded, former accountant prepared to face the press. The leader of a party which decides everything by consensus, Roger could make no commitments about anything until he talked to everybody. He was sure that as the only Green in the Dail he would be their spokesperson. No, he didn't use recycled paper yet, and he hadn't gotten around to converting his car to lead-free gas, but then he didn't really expect to get elected. To put it mildly, the Irish politicians don't know what to do about Roger but the press is having a great time. He's been called everything from an "amiable sheep dog" to the "Leader of the Little Green Men from the Planet Zog."



## Quarter Notes

Declan Lynch, in the *Sunday Independent*, says that if RTE's election coverage had taken the form of a Hollywood musical, Garland would arrive amid celebration:

*Then suddenly, the crowd would clear, and Roger would be left all alone centre stage. A winding staircase would materialize behind him with a guitar lying on one of the steps.*

*Roger would shrug melancholically, essay a wry smile, and walk over to the stairway. He would then sit down with the guitar, and begin to sing. . . "It's not easy. . . being Green."*

Well, it was bound to happen—a headline over an interview with Garland in *The Sunday Press*: "How our Green Ulysses ended up in the Dail."

Brendan Power compares Garland to Leopold Bloom and says he was like a French revolutionary who stormed the Bastille and found the key in the door. Power asked Garland how he would comport himself in the Dail, among all the politicians and their political agendas. Roger answered with a disarmingly honest admission: "There will be a certain amount of making it up as we go along." Joyce would have loved him.

Now, is this not the material for great fiction? In the next chapter, we could have a coalition government of Roger Garland, the former accountant who chucked it all in 1982 for the Green Party (admired for his administrative skills); Martin McHugh, the Donegal football hero with the Killybegs pub (as long as his shoulder heals); and

J.O'Grady, the letter writer from Wicklow with his vision of a recycling mega-factory on Dublin Bay (assuming that he finds his financial backer). And I'm sure Mary Duffy of Galway would raise her one and a half cheers for democracy to at least one and three quarters, which, in turn, would send the RTE analysts to their computers to figure out the statistically significant attitudinal change in the average Irish voter.

Stay tuned, and watch your local bookstore for new novels from Ireland.



JOHN P. McCARTHY

### *Irish-American Conservatives and the IRA*

A little known aspect of ethnic politics in America today is the tendency of many Irish-Americans, generally conservative on most political and social issues, to be sympathetic to the IRA and its political arm, Sinn Féin. Decidedly law and order types, many of them policemen and law enforcement officers, these Irish-Americans find no inconsistency in applauding violent revolutionaries in Northern Ireland. Their conservatism makes them ill-disposed to programs aiming at achieving racial equity in employment, housing or





## Quarter Notes

schooling and insensitive to civil libertarian concerns about judicial and arrest procedures. Yet they vigorously denounce the British and Northern Irish authorities for discriminatory treatment of Catholics, for police brutality and for "star chamber" judicial proceedings.

These contradictions should convince any observer that even if all the purported grievances of the Catholics in Northern Ireland were resolved, whether it be discriminatory hiring practices, police maltreatment or judicial arbitrariness, many Irish-American nationalists would still be unhappy. Why? Because their real agenda, like that of the IRA and Sinn Fein, is the violent severance of the ties between Northern Ireland and Britain and the political unification of the island of Ireland.

It is possible to understand, while not approving, why an IRA or Sinn Fein supporter in Northern Ireland might feel this way. Serious grievances on the part of the minority Catholic community have left a feeling that no justice can be achieved under a British connection. Naturally much of this Catholic attitude has been reinforced by familial tradition as well as peer and community pressure. A small portion of the very recent Irish immigrants to the United States who are from Northern Irish or border counties or from families strongly steeped in Irish republicanism also reflect this attitude. Lastly, among the supporters of Sinn Fein in the United States are those who do have a consistent revolutionary and anti-imperialist attitude that enables them to

link the Sinn Fein cause with that of the PLO, the Sandinistas and similar movements in the world. Naturally these Irish are extremely critical of many American policies, foreign and domestic, and institutions and not just any American cooperation with the British on Northern Ireland.

Only a small portion of the Irish-American community are sympathetic to Sinn Fein. Some of them regularly mount picket lines against British consulates or visiting British dignitaries. What is interesting is the large number of Irish-Americans and their ethnic organizations who accept or support the Sinn Fein or Irish Northern Aid (a Sinn Fein support group in the United States) agenda. Such people allow Noraid or even IRA activists to be honored as grand marshalls of St. Patrick's Day parades and endorse the efforts to enact the MacBride principles in various state legislatures and local assemblies. These principles threaten disinvestment of public pension funds from American-owned enterprises in Northern Ireland and work to discourage desperately needed investment in that province. The symbolic and essentially nationalist, rather than anti-discriminatory, character of the MacBride campaign is what appeals to these Irish-Americans. None of the affected American firms has had to be confronted with disinvestment on grounds of discriminatory policies.

Why do these people act this way? Part of it is a purely emotional response based on a combination of ignorance about contemporary Ireland and very faulty history or mythology based on



## Quarter Notes

family conversation and music. It must be realized that probably 90% of the 43 million Americans claiming Irish ancestry trace that ancestry to immigrants who came to the United States well before the attainment of Irish political independence in 1922. Accordingly, their historical consciousness of Ireland, to the degree they have any, is of an Ireland that was part of Britain. It is quite easy therefore for anyone so casually alert to things in Ireland to assume the present situation as simply a continuation of an historic struggle lionized in song and tale.

For all the rhetoric about Northern Ireland, another rationale for current Irish-American nationalism is a kind of internal American ethnic tribalism. Resentment at the advances of assorted minorities and, in particular, annoyance at their celebration of their respective, and sometimes relatively recently discovered, ethnic histories has caused some of the more established ethnic groups to imitate them. What better way to out-shout minority activists than by proclaiming that one's own people, even if they are three thousand miles away, are suffering as much if not more.

A last, but even more subtle, explanation for contemporary Irish-American identity with Sinn Fein revolutionaries is a completely unwarranted tendency to read the Northern Irish question as a religious struggle, the last phase in the conflict that emerged from the Reformation of the sixteenth century. Sinn Fein bends over backward to disassociate itself from appearing to have a sectarian character, although it is very ready to

employ church liturgy for the funerals of its fallen heroes as well as to imply that Irish Catholics who don't endorse them are traitors. Yet some Irish-Americans, particularly some of a relatively intellectual bent, are filled with a historical sense replete with Anglophobia. The Anglophobia results from the identification of England with Protestantism, liberalism and modernism in general. A person of such a mind identifies the current IRA with the Confederation of Kilkenny that fought for the Catholic cause in Ireland back in the 1640's, with the Irish exiles fighting for continental armies against the British in the War of the Austrian Succession and the Seven Years War between 1740 and 1763 and with the Irish volunteers who were ready to defend the rump of the Papal States against the forces of the Risorgimento in 1870. One activist Irish-American has even compared the IRA and their struggle to that of the Contras in Nicaragua!

The Catholic Irish-American supporters of the IRA get a definite satisfaction in beholding assorted non-Catholic political figures, including some Congressmen, catering for their votes by touting a hardline criticism of Britain. By being on the "Catholic" side on the Irish question seems to spare the same politicians from rebuke when they pay no heed to such serious American Catholic concerns as the restricting of abortions or the assisting of parochial education.



## EILEÁN NÍ CHUILLÉANÁIN

## A Voice

(i)

Having come this far, responding  
 To a woman's voice, a distant wailing,  
 Now he can distinguish words:  
 You may come in—  
 You are already in.

But the wall is thornbushes, crammed and barbed.  
 A human skeleton, warped in a dive, is clasped,  
 Gripping a flowered briar. His wincing flesh reproves him  
 As it turns and flows  
 Backwards like a tide.

(ii)

Knowing it now for a trick of the light  
 He marches forward, takes account  
 Of true stones and mortared walls,  
 Downfaces the shimmer  
 And shakes to hear the voice humming again.

In the bed of the stream  
 She lies in her bones—  
 Wide bearing hips, and square  
 Elbows. Around them lodged,  
 Gravegoods of horsehair and an ebony peg.

'What sort of ornament is this? What sort of mutilation?'  
 It persists even here, in the ridged fingerbone.

And he hears her voice, a wail of strings.

MEDBH McGUCKIAN

## The Boathouse

Antimacassars circumflect chairs  
From the world's grim thirties—moss  
From a human skull. When I heard  
Soulclicks, I thought it was the heat  
Coming on, but it was Byron, my  
Only son, born in the blackout,  
Growing his hair to shoulder length  
All winter awkwardly. Seducer,  
Drunk, bad poet, at the bright  
Tip of my brain I was a rising  
Young sculptress sucking the calcium  
Out of his spine, and keeping my  
Hand over his hand until I  
Rolled him into one sensational  
Pastime, whose disaster merely  
Fingered me, slice by supine slice.

SEAMUS HEANEY

## YEATS' NOBILITY

By the age of 50, Yeats had gathered together different strands in his make-up and different endeavours in his career in order to ply them into that mutually ratifying set of attitudes and prejudices which he would eventually call the "dream of the noble and beggarman." His spiritualist philosophy, his national dedications and his poetic ambitions were all set to be hammered into a unity. A powerful note of certitude began to be heard, as if some strong bronze instrument had been suddenly mastered by a player of consummate authority.

Typical of the new sonority was a declaration like "we begin to live once we conceive life as tragedy." This is of a piece with the gong tormented music Yeats would make over the next quarter of a century, and it possesses the *gravitas* and sombreness of his extraordinary poem of 1915, *Ego Dominus Tuus*. In that work, a year before the Easter Rising and the Battle of Somme, two years before the Russian Revolution, four years before the Irish War of Independence and six years before the Civil War, Yeats was foresuffering his predicament as visionary poet in a time of violence and catastrophe. It is the first of the great wisdom poems that he would continue to write, with increasing rhetorical command, throughout the teens, 20s and 30s of the century:

those that love the world serve it in action,  
 Grow rich, popular and full of influence,  
 And should they paint or write, still it is action:  
 The struggle of the fly in marmalade.  
 The rhetorician would deceive his neighbours,  
 The sentimentalist himself; while art  
 Is but a vision of reality.  
 What portion in the world can the artist have  
 Who has wakened from the common dream  
 But dissipation and despair?

Within this schema, it is easy to see how the 1916 leaders count more as artists than as men of action. They had conceived life as tragedy and sacrificed themselves to their own imagined death, behaving with the resolute clarity of Shakespearean heroes. They took away death's sting by making death an artistic closure, a foreseen end to be approached with *sprezzatura*. They became one with Davis, Mangan, Ferguson through their patriotic impulse, but they also became one with Major Robert Gregory, a major in the armed forces who executed them, through their lonely, self-fashioning embrace of the heroic style. They, like Gregory, belonged with the spirited profile of any Renaissance captain springing undaunted to the scaffold. The mythic figures of the Rising mediated aesthetic values as well as political ones; at the end of

Yeats' poem, the green is worn as much to mark the leaders' initiation into the tragic sense of life as to flaunt an eternal Irish defiance.

Obviously Yeats was not without political passions, but his "history" was a very different one from that which impelled the majority of the rebels of Easter Week. Their anti-Englishness was derived from an sense of indignity and racial affront, whereas Yeats' was connected with antagonism to mass culture, mass production, herd passivity, opinion-drugged readerships and a generally dimmed individuality and spirituality—all of which he associated with the English condition. Nevertheless, by the ennobling effects of a sacrificial act, these poet-leaders had joined Yeats' Olympians, and had been co-opted by him into his stance as the age's antagonist.

For about 15 years, during which he wrote the great volumes which include his surest, most opulent and mellow-toned poetry, there was a brimming-up in Yeats of pride, confidence and daring. Pride in his Anglo-Irish heritage of detachment and inner freedom, and in his Celtic heritage of immemorial mystical truth. Confidence in his powers as an artist who had made words obey his call. And daring in his arrogation to himself of the role of national poet. In *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919), *The Tower* (1928), and *The Winding Stair* (1933), Yeats spoke as the voice of greatly representative imagination. Yet he spoke not for any party or faction but utterly from himself and for himself.

**"Yeats brings into modern poetry a quality which is rare indeed and which we may call nobility."**

One can argue that in spite of the Anglo-Irish flourish of these books, the cothurnus raises him above the caste. Yeats the poet both endures and embodies the whole field of forces active in Ireland and the world beyond, and is as responsive to the apocalyptic side of himself as to the elegaic. The prospect of devastation excited as well as distressed him, and in his final years that whole apocalyptic excitement would be allowed to go rampant; but the moment it rests, as music or a tide rests, at the full, replete with possibility, in equilibrium. In a sequence like *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen*, the fortitude and composure of Yeats' gaze is equal to the violence and danger of the historical disintegration which it witnesses. His "vision of reality" is in line with and adequate to the historical reality which cruelly imposes itself; and, in achieving such a combination of tough-mindedness and plangency, Yeats brings into modern poetry a quality which is rare indeed and which we may call "nobility."

This nobility has nothing to do with birth or rank but concerns rather the measure of what Wallace Stevens called "our spiritual height and depth." When he made his definition, Stevens was thinking in general terms, but his description of the attribute perfectly fits the case of W. B. Yeats. It is "a violence from within that protects us from a violence without"; it is "the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality"—which is exactly what the great Yeats poems do. It is hard in them to distinguish between personal and public concerns; sequences like *Meditations in Time of Civil War* and *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen* have about them the high pitch of sacred rite. In them, Yeats divests himself of his domestic identity to become the voice of dramat-

ically encompassing imagination, he dons the mantle of the wisdom-speaker and the memory-keeper, becomes the shaman figure who confronts menace with ritual song. Those old-fashioned melodramatic images of wicked magicians in towers working spells that effect devastating results by remote control are a parody and reversal of the situation of W. B. Yeats during his famous maturity, when he lived in a Norman tower at Ballylee and produced poems of personal extremity which were fashioned by the work of solitary art into a marvellous impersonality.

In a poem like *Dialogue of Self and Soul*, Anglo-Ireland, Celtic Ireland, Civil War Ireland have all dropped away. We are not any more in historical place but in the place of meditation, the place of writing, the place where the second, imagined life is possible. But it is a notable matter of fact that Yeats managed to bring about a congruence between his second life as a creature reborn in poems and his first life as a husband and a householder. As the tower-dweller, in fact and in symbol, Yeats lived out what was in him. Intellectual endeavour, solitary application to written toil, haughty resistance, traditional values—Thoor Ballylee literally stood for all that; it also stood, by being joined at the base to a thatched cottage, as a visible diagram of the combined heritages of the humble and the high in Irish life, the Catholic peasantry and the Protestant Ascendancy, whose best gifts the poet aspired to combine and promulgate. It is of course true that Yeats' professed aim was to restore the tower for his wife, to make it a part of family affections; but once George began to be the mouthpiece for messages from ghostly instructors, the tower passed from the realm of the familial to become part of "the spiritual intellectual's great work." In producing the automatic writings, Yeats' young wife co-operated in the transformation of a conjugal union into daimonic project.

Yeats was now the poet absolutely. Like the Irish-language poet, Anthony Raftery, who had also passed through Ballylee and had given an image of himself *in extremis* as a man "with his back to the wall, / Playing tunes to empty pockets," Yeats in Ballylee is a figure of the poet manning the last ditch. Fortified by the stone, in both a physical and a literal way. I like to remember, for example, that the word *stanza* comes from the Italian word for a room, and to find in the architectural sureness of stone rooms and winding stairs an image of the physicality and undislodgability of Yeats' poetic forms.

Yet we must concede that Yeats' exorbitant identification of himself with the figure of the prophet became in his last years overweening and theatrical. What in his most opulent work sounds triumphant mutates in some of his late poems into a note of tyranny. In *Hound Voice* he allied himself with the berserk instinctive predatoriness of baying hounds. In *The Statues* he conjured up Cuchulain as a bloodied warrior and presented him like a sort of totem animal stalking Pádraig Pearse through the Post Office. In *On the Boiler* he went ape for eugenics. And it is because of such rampant sentiments, all of a piece with his attraction to Italian fascism, that, 50 years after Yeats' death and 20 years after the inception of our own newly violent era in Northern Ireland, we have our own resistances and demurrals also.

Nevertheless, it is possible that we have insufficiently pondered the general implications of his hard-won insight that all reality comes to us as the reward

of labour. There is surely good political meaning in his sense of life as an abounding conflict of opposites, and in his vision of reality as a process in which opposites die each other's life, live each other's death. Just as there is a generous allowance in his conviction—overriding his sense of hierarchy and election—that, even among the gombeens and Paudeens of this earth, “There cannot be. . . A single soul that lacks a sweet crystalline cry.”

His persistent drive was indeed what Auden divined it to be: to “teach the free man how to praise.” His nationalism, for example, was essentially another avenue towards an ideal if unattainable “Unity of Being,” a hankering after “the abundant glittering jut” of life lived spontaneously and certainly within its own free terms, fundamentally more a matter of grace than of genes. It seems unnecessarily perverse to sully Yeats’ whole reputation because of a small, strident and dangerous group of poems that show him in a role that he once imagined contemptuously as “an old bellows full of angry wind.” The great bulk of his work promotes a renovative idea of self-transcendence, and raises us to states where our emotional natures are replenished and our best-dreamt possibilities corroborated.





PATRICIA BOYLE HABERSTROH

## A Conversation With Eileán Ní Chuilleanáin

*Q: As a working poet and one of the editors of Cyphers, you have a sense of developments in contemporary Irish poetry. Can you tell us what you see?*

Well, we've been around quite an interesting time. When we began *Cyphers*, there were neglected poets, for example, Paul Durcan, who was hardly getting published at all, and others like Patrick Galvin who did not quite fit the academic image of what an Irish poet ought to be like. I think that we probably helped to keep some poets, like Durcan, and our own editors Macdara Woods and Leland Bardwell, publishing at a time when things seemed to be going against them. Then people started sending us material; we got early poetry by Medbh McGuckian, and poetry and stories from Frank McGuinness who is now a very important playwright. We've recently found much good writing by women; Rita Higgins is one of the poets we published first. We found quite a lot of diversity and a good deal of social concern, people wanting to write about social rather than political conditions, wanting to write about the abortion and divorce referendums, rather than about atrocities in Northern Ireland. In other words, people seem to be writing about things they think they have some control over, not about an historical event that is going on very close but still seems to be somewhere else.

*Q: As a writer and reader, what do you think are the unique characteristics of this poetry? How is it different from other European or American poetry?*

There are new developments in the direction of a more urban poetry. There are also developments dealing with the Irish people's consciousness of language. It's a country with two languages—Irish and English. There's a great deal of interest in translations from other languages, an identification with places like Latin America, Africa and Eastern Europe, and with the poetic voices that come from these cultures, especially the sound of anger which can be conveyed from one language to another. I think that Irish writers, especially those from the Republic, often feel that they are not getting a great hearing in London and also that they don't want to be just part of the English literary scene and are looking towards the literature of other countries.

*Q: Since the '60s there has been a great deal of poetry written in Ireland. What do you think is responsible for this?*

I think it certainly is happening. One notices that novelists or playwrights are also writing poetry. For example, there is a very good novelist and short story writer named Padraig Rooney who has won the Kavanagh Award for poetry, though I think his first interest must be fiction. Why the interest in

poetry? I think the influence of the poet Patrick Kavanagh had a lot to do with this, because Kavanagh provided people with a tragicomic way of commenting on the whole of society, and I think people were very impressed by that. In Dublin in the early 60s, young people beginning to think about writing were enormously influenced by Kavanagh—by his personality and by the fact that he was there to be seen and talked to. To some extent, the poetry in the North had a different influence, an English influence, but also it corresponds to the general liberation, a sort of poetic view of life, that was going on everywhere in the 60s. A valuable side of the 60s was its lyricism, and its belief in, for example, love, which Kavanagh was interested in, and which can be talked about in verse with a particular kind of lyric obliquity. The backbone of fiction is moralistic; in the early fiction anyway, there is a strong moral sense, a sense of moral dilemma. I think probably that the Irish people, while they are still very interested in morality, became a little less fascinated with sitting up to the small hours thinking about it.

*Q: The audience for Irish poets has grown, certainly in the States. The number of courses in Irish Studies and in Irish poetry in American universities, for example, has increased significantly. How wide is the audience in Ireland for poetry?*

Sometimes you would think it had grown very much, and at other times, you wonder whether anybody listens to poetry at all. I find it is often hard to quantify the audience for poetry, but I think on the whole it has grown. One of the things that has happened since the 60s is that the poetry reading has become a fact. People have got good at reading their poetry which they used not to be. Poetry used to be read over the radio in a kind of holy voice, and now it's read at a poetry reading in one's own voice. Members of the audience have also become conscious of their own creativity; a large number of readers of poetry are also writers of poetry, and there are now structures for people to admit to this, instead of secretly carrying it around in their pockets.

*Q: Have the publishing opportunities increased?*

Yes, in the 60s there was one Irish poetry publisher, the Dolmen Press, and then after that, a number of new presses got started, with their own program. Raven Arts, for example, who appear to believe that all Irish poets should come from the suburbs of Dublin. There are other publishers who have different programs or no program but have expanded the possibilities. You just have to find some program that will include you. Of course, technologically, it is now much easier and cheaper to publish a book than a few years ago.

*Q: Some Irish poets, including Seamus Heaney and Thomas Kinsella, have taken teaching jobs at American universities and spend much of their time in the States. Many others have come as poets-in-residence. Why do you think they do this?*

I have no inside information, but these are people with families to support. They don't want to live in genteel poverty all their life, nor do they want a full-time job, which is what both Heaney and Kinsella had until they came here. So a job for half the year is better than that for a whole. There are only

a few writers-in-residence jobs in Ireland, like the one Medbh McGuckian had at Queen's University in Belfast for the last three years. There also aren't that many academic jobs in Ireland. I have one, and I couldn't give up work if I wanted to because of the financial impact on my family.

As for other reasons, I suppose all Irish poets like to feel there's a world elsewhere and going to America is not like going to London in the sense that you are not being absorbed into another culture. In America, you look alien enough and sound alien enough to still retain an Irish identity.

*Q: Do you think that the poetry in Northern Ireland will be as prolific as it has been? We know about the forces that gave rise to poets like Seamus Heaney and Derek Mahon, and there is the younger generation of Northern poets like Paul Muldoon and Medbh McGuckian. Will this continue?*

One can't tell. Obviously poets like Heaney, Mahon, Michael Longley, James Simmons, and McGuckian will go on writing because they are good, committed, hardworking poets. As for the future, there are younger poets coming up, though I don't actually like their work as much as the poets I've mentioned. That's not to say there aren't some others coming up. I would hope perhaps that some more women might appear, but I think that the North is a more hostile environment for women than the South.

*Q: Why is this so?*

It's a no-nonsense kind of culture. There's a Northern periodical, *The Honest Ulsterman*, which seems to say that poetry is not airy fairy stuff; it's perfectly straight "man-to-man" stuff. When you hear that, you can understand why Medbh McGuckian's poetry is so convoluted and so peculiar. That's why I think that once she has done it, more women poets may appear. But who's to know where poetry in the North is going to come from next?

*Q: Do you think this emphasis on the poets in the North has overshadowed the poetry in the Republic? We sometimes hear that some poets are not being recognized because people are always identifying Irish poetry with that written in the North.*

I think that is undoubtedly true. That's happening even in the South where people now think of the North as the home of poetry. And if somebody says there's a new Belfast poet arriving on the scene, that poet might be immediately accepted. Thirty years ago it was the other way. John Montague says that, when he won an award for poetry, his hometown newspaper reported him as a Dublin poet. Fashions do change. But some people in the South feel there's a bit too much emphasis on the poets of the North, and that this may have to do with the London media, the London publishers, who favor the North. Sometimes Dublin publishers have to ring up literary editors six times to remind them to publish a review. These publishers do not have the money for hype.

*Q: Related to that, do you think poets can have any impact on the political or social scene in Ireland? Do the boundaries, North and South, or Catholic and Protestant, disappear when you are a poet? Some of the Northern poets, for*

*example, claimed that when they gathered together, it did not matter whether they were from a Catholic or Protestant background, they were poets. How true do you think this is?*

It's true in a way. I think there are lots of reasons for agreement, lots of common ground. There is also a degree of resentment, and of jealousy, over big reputations. When all the poets are together, they can appreciate each other. But when you look at media hype, poetry anthologies, instant answers to questions about literature, that makes people angry and feeling to some extent that the record has been falsified.

*Q: Do partisan politics affect how these poets write?*

Sometimes, yes. People have long memories and, to some extent, create a sense of falsification. James Simmons, for example, is a nice fellow but he's written poems that appear to me a very crude simplification of the politics of Northern Ireland. Therefore, I would say there are things about his writing that are harmful and wrong. But I can also say that he was right; if that is what he wanted to write, he was right to write them. There are other points of difference, such as how much importance is to be given to poetry in Gaelic. And obviously, in this connection, the fact that the Catholics are likely to know Gaelic and others are not makes a big difference. The critic, Edna Longley, for example, is very hostile to any mention of Gaelic. She was born and raised in the South but has a Trinity Protestant background. But the sense that so many Northern and Southern Catholic, and some Southern Protestant, poets have of the importance of Gaelic is a separation factor.

*Q: Let's turn to another group. As a woman poet, what do you feel is the climate for women poets in Ireland? Many of them claim they are still fighting a battle to be recognized.*

Some of them feel they are, and, if they feel that way, they probably are. I find that there is a great welcome for women's poetry in some areas but there's also a sense that women are being strident and concerning themselves only with sexuality and topics of breaking taboos and such. I notice, for example, that a poet like Rita Higgins, who has all this class anger and writes very fluently, very much writes as a woman. She's had quite a success. I suppose if all you have to say is "I'm a woman," that doesn't get you very far. I think Higgins was influenced by Paul Durcan, especially in her early work, but also there is the sense that she's a person who has always lived in a female world. So she writes absolutely naturally in feminine terms.

*Q: Why is it that many of the anthologies of Irish verse include little or no poetry by women?*

American culture has progressed on this front of considering that one ought to ask the question of what is happening to women. The Irish might well think that it's a question not to be asked, that it shouldn't make a difference that they are women. Women are getting quite a bit of attention in Ireland lately. But American women have been powerful; they have had jobs and money and whatever status goes with that. Ireland is a poor country. The majority of

people are poor and, in a situation like that, you can bet your boots that the women are poor. That is clearly the case with Irish women poets. When you look at my generation of women poets, it's very noticeable that none of us came from the working class or anywhere near it. We're all professional class and very often with political background. We arrived at the moment of changes for women, of contraception, for example. We also came after the generation where, when women married, they lost their job in the civil service.

*Q: What about poetry outside of Dublin and Belfast? Where are the other centers?*

A; There's quite a group in Galway connected with Salmon Press. One of the poets they've published is Ciarin O'Driscoll, a very accomplished poet and a very urgent voice who is living in Limerick at the moment. He used to be in Cork, and there are a number of poets in Cork. There was a time when John Montague, Paul Durcan and Tom McCarthy were all living there creating quite a lot of activity in Cork.

*Q: My last question goes back to something you said at the beginning. If contemporary Irish poets are writing social poems, they must assume there's a reason to do so. Do they feel they will effect any kind of change?*

I think that you never know what line might turn out to be important. But it might be important only because it was taken up by a politician. John Montague wrote a line once about old molds being broken, and I'm sure he was fed up with the number of people who took that line over. For a poet, it's not so much the passion for influencing events or expressing emotion, as saying what you see. It's like a photographer to an extent. Photographers can influence history but their main task is not to influence but to record. As with the photographer, the angle may be everything. It may not be useful as a statistic, but poetry is a kind of testimony.



EITHNE STRONG

## BALD

To endow my emulative compositions  
with a global dimension,  
a universally concerned aura—indeed,  
even extra-terrestrial engagement, since  
all that space is for agonising—  
I have a list of things to put in poems:  
you get nowhere these days in the arts  
unless you ring convincing  
in your urgency to radical reform,  
to far-reaching influence.

And yet today, I feel myself  
primarily moved to write about  
those balding heads.  
Not on the list but  
for years they have disturbed me  
and I have kept reminding myself—  
and then forgetting—to put reactions,  
nicely crafted, on paper  
with just the degree of detachment  
to win critical approval.

I am always troubled to see  
those unhappy strands compelled  
to freakish length athwart the bone, forced  
from their natural home, still-active rim  
above the ear, or even—unhappier yet—  
dislocated from the innate downward drift  
of poll and dragged, maimed, top of scalp,  
itself an honourable, often very handsome  
manifestation but now mocked, diminished  
by such grotesque mimicry.

I applaud the bare and sheening dome,  
give it special praise,  
find it has a dignity; enhances presence;  
there are those we know who carry it so.  
They have, of course, other baldnesses  
they cover, as mine do I, wearing my thatch  
with a difference—that's why I now suggest  
to all of us baldies a hanging on to courage,  
letting the hair fall as it may: possibly  
this rings sufficiently global for today?

A Story by  
PETER LASALLE

## *The Door From Seven Eccles Street*

**I**t's true. I, Zeke Richard, was Willy Higgins' literary secretary that year in Dublin.

I had been answering for him the veritable flood of inquiries that were now coming over from everybody from the fiction editor of *Esquire* (the small stationery sheet, the little mustached man for a logo) to a woman working on a master's thesis on Willy at a state university in California (she herself taught at a junior college there called Santa Rosa, and that stationery was a larger sheet, a tasteful buff hue with a maroon logo of some of the school's buildings under palms at the top). There was no formal salary, but always generous Willy slipped me a five-pound note now and then. Plus, he paid for all my cab fare, and there were the meals and the bar tabs constantly at his expense.

That was in 1971, when I was twenty-three and Willy was riding on the crest of the success of the novel he had written about growing up in the Dublin slum. I wonder if anybody today ever even thinks that much about the crooked little man, Willy Higgins, the writer who typed with his toes.

Willy was living in a stucco government rowhouse then. It was in the Kimmage project and the very same house where the book had been set and where his mother had raised pretty much by herself the thirteen children in the Higgins brood. After she died, one of Willy's sisters had taken over both the place and the tending to Willy.

One Saturday afternoon I picked up some stationery supplies for Willy in Eason's on O'Connell Street. A sheaf of canary-yellow foolscap; some onion-skin letter-size sheets and matching envelopes for the correspondence I would write on his behalf. I also went over to the paperback section and got him a Penguin copy of Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*. It was a book that Willy hadn't read and that I kept telling him he surely should, maybe getting carried away with my pitch on it one night and claiming that it indeed could rank along with *Ulysses* itself as one of the masterpieces of twentieth-century literature. During my senior year at the small state college there in the woods at the top of Cape Cod, I had become quite excited about Lowry. In homage, I didn't booze much more than the usual college senior, but I was always quick with the hopefully dark and intriguing Lowry quote, "Save me, thought the consul vaguely," and that sort of thing. I watched the shopgirl ring up my purchase and felt somehow a literary man myself, buying what had long been my idea of a truly great novel for a writer who was probably better known than any other in Dublin right now. I don't think that constantly wearing the horseblanket of a heather-blue sport jacket—literary garb?—that I had bought while in the city was any affectation. After all, in Dublin you wanted as much wool as possible close to you on these blowy days of the supposed spring, now that it was April. Yet maybe I did fancy I cut a figure. The girl's black hair was tied back in a green ribbon, her cheeks rosy.

"Lovely cover, isn't it?" she said. The volume, of course, had the orange Penguin spine, and its paperback front showed a full-color reproduction of an oil painting done by a Mexican depicting a crowd of people celebrating the Day of the Dead.

"You know, there's a fellow in London whose entire job is just matching paintings with these Penguin paperbacks." I said that knowingly, an insider's line. Actually, I had read it just the week before in the Sunday *London Observer*.

"Cushy," she said.

"I guess it is."

"Thank you, sir."

She smiled and carefully folded down the top of the brown paper bag, putting a strip of plastic tape over it.

Outside O'Connell street, the sun had popped out from behind those clouds that always seemed to be moving in Dublin. That burst of light, in the cold, was all that was needed to metamorphose the lumpy old city from its ongoing grayness into so much splashing color. The blue-and-yellow double-decker buses chugged along through the traffic of the six-lane boulevard. You noticed how the Irish were great fans of the bright glossy enamel to trim the doors and window ledges of the sooty granite and sooty redbrick, the paint greener than green, naturally, at the offices I passed of Board Failte, the Irish tourism headquarters. Even the usual stink of diesel fumes from the traffic as mixed with that sourly burnt smell from the Guinness factory down the Liffey—they charred the malt to get that characteristic blackness, and there was never any escaping the tinge of it in the thick air—was somehow pleasant.

I was supposed to meet Gita, the German girl, at the Bailey. I cut through a sidestreet, and then a little pocket of narrow zig-zagging alleyways. The Army and Navy store was there, and that fall, not long after I had first arrived, I bought at the store a cheap Czechoslovakian backpack and an imitation Swiss Army knife (the chromed corkscrew lasted for exactly one bottle) and made a slow bicycle and hitching tour around the country's coast. I was usually the only one there in the youth hostels in the off-season, working at the masonite mess-hall tables alone on what I was sure was going to be my own great novel. The store's windows now showed the usual clutter of peacoats and tents and tools and even gas masks (all guaranteed to be bargained-priced indeed, according to the hand-lettered placards), and at exactly that spot something hit me hard and wonderful. It set the tone of that whole day, and the night too.

With the sky straight above flashing its swatches of blue, and the old buildings coolly black, some teenage office boys were taking a long lunch break. They played soccer on the cobbled street, their ties flopping, their faces red in the cold. And it was a combination of the rightness of their play like that and the music that just happened to be coming from the loudspeaker of a record shop somewhere nearby. It was George Harrison doing, "My Sweet Lord"; the distinctly Liverpoolian accent was double-tracked for harmony and those elasticized guitar riffs seemed almost scored to match the boys' dull thudding of their shoes on the battered ball and their shouts echoing in the lane.

"I really want to see you,  
Oh, I really want to see-eee you..."



“The lads didn’t have to do it,” Eamon said. He placed the Norelco electric shaver on the bar top at the Bailey. He was big and ruddily handsome, in a trim dark-blue suit and wide pindotted tie he has worn to the luncheon that the other “lads” on the University golf team had given in his honor that day.

“It is quite nice, isn’t it,” Gita said. Actually, she wasn’t German, just German by descent. She had grown up in South Africa, where her father reportedly owned the controlling interest in the one color television system that had recently been sold to the country. The family had always maintained a vacation home in grassy Wicklow, keeping riding horses there, and so Gita had decided to take her degree in economics at University College in Dublin. Tall, her blonde hair combed straight back from her forehead and sleek enough to always seem almost wet, she liked to wear black, like the wool cape and the wool skirt she had on in the bar that afternoon. Her teeth were slightly bucked, chicly so, I thought.

“I mean, it is,” I said to him. “They say you can’t beat the system of rotating blades.” I had to make conversation. It lay there like a downed mallard.

“They really didn’t have to do it at all, the lads.” He took a sip from his half-pint of Harp lager; he shook his head, so serious about it. He was the team’s captain, and I knew right from the time I first met Gita a few months before that she dated him. I must admit that when she called me to say that she would be in town that afternoon from the new poured-concrete campus in the suburbs, and it would be good to get together for a drink, I hadn’t expected Eamon to be thrown in with the package. But now he went to call one of the lads who had been sick and unable to make it to the luncheon, to thank him as well for the gesture of the gift. Gita put her slim fingers on my arm and explained that she had just happened to run into him on Grafton Street. Sitting on the bar stool’s soft black cushion—were all supposedly posh pubs in Dublin sworn to that black Naugahyde for the stools and the padded seats along the walls, the dark mahogany Formica for the bar itself and the low tables on the cushy Axminster carpet showing a red and gold print?—she looked right at me. Her eyes were brown pools. The barboy in his too-small jacket was watching us, I knew.

The Bailey was known as a literary bar. It was owned by the rakish man who also ran the *Dublin Magazine* (whenever he got up enough energy to put out another issue of the misnamed quarterly), and it even had on display, mounted on a wall of pool-table green felt in the hallway, the glossy black door bearing a fan window up top and the buffed brass number seven. Yes, the one salvaged from the house on Eccles Street, levelled not long before. I had met Willy Higgins at the Bailey. He was in his wheelchair. He grinned; he alternated on straws for his usual double Irish beside a pint of Guinness at one of the tables, sitting with his sister, Margaret, and her husband, Aidan, a manual laborer for the railroad. That meeting led to my sending back the feature on him, “Around Dublin with Willy Higgins,” to the Fall River newspaper I had worked for right after college. Willy admitted then that although he himself put in too much time at the Bailey and although everybody there made a major deal of him, the place was filled with “f-f-fawking phonies.” His cerebral palsy had left his speech rather slurred, even when he was completely sober; the ready expletive was used, half the time, just as a filler to keep the sentence moving, rather than out of any particular opinion, as in this case.

sentence moving, rather than out of any particular opinion, as in this case.

When Eamon returned to the bar, there was some talk about the States. Gita had only been to New York City, and she had been very young then. Eamon went on about how he had spent the summer the year before with his older cousin and his family in Shaker Heights, working in Cleveland.

"Talk about a set up. Two Mustangs in the garage, the Chris Craft to take out on the lake on weekends."

I don't think he liked it when Gita asked how my novel was progressing.

After an hour or so, Eamon was pretty far gone. The sunlight slanted in shafts through the windows high up; dust motes hung suspended within, like the stars you see when you rub your own eyes.

"Damn, I can't believe they did this for me." His voice cracked. He picked up the shaver again, the cord dangling in a curly-cue. He started to sniff and actually got teary.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"No, I certainly understand," I said.

Gita put her hand on my arm again. Her eyes looked right at me, and I knew then that she realized he was a fool, a joke, really. And for the first time I realized that this boyfriend of sorts probably wasn't an obstacle, and I stood a solid chance with this special girl who, I knew, half of the guys in the university's College of Commerce were pining after.

I walked the mile and a half back to my bedsitter in Rathgar.

The bedsitter was just that—a white-walled single room in a subdivided Georgian house in a neighborhood with neat walls out front and narrow gardens in back. A single bare lightbulb; a single sagging bed with brown blankets as coarse as anything a monk ever sampled; a single brown upholstered sitting chair; a single oval of a porcelain sink (cold water only); a single burner on the table-top gas stove that was hooked up to a shilling meter; a single white-painted bricked-over fireplace. I had decorated the wall above the fireplace with some paintings by D.H. Lawrence I had snipped out of the colored supplement of a *Sunday Observer*. They surely weren't racy by men's magazine standards, but they were enough to cause a second scrutinizing peek from the chubby landlady when she knocked for her weekly two-pounds-ten-shillings rent. It was maybe some diversion from her usual life at home after work, life that went on in a similar cubicle across the hall to the constant blare of the irregular scheduling of the RTE black-and-white programming (old movies and reruns of "The Saint" and "Bonanza," a lot of led recitations of a decade of the rosary, and, of course, the brassy Irish national anthem).

I was hungry after the two Harp lagers at the Bailey and all that walking. Plus, I knew that if I was going to spend the next several hours with Willy, I should brace myself with a good meal for the inevitable boozing.

I grilled a couple of sausages left in the cupboard above the sink. No refrigerator, but in a way there was no need for one, seeing most of the time, like now, I walked around with the steam of my breath puffing like cartoon balloons; I occasionally leaned over to rotate my hands near the clicking orange bars of the space heater, which didn't have the Peking Man's chance of combatting the draftiness of those high old ceilings. I had the sausage along with a cooked pouch of dehydrated Heinz Erin Cabbage, two slices of rough brown bread, a glass of milk, and three chocolate grahams from the new box

of Jacob's Assorted Biscuits. Perfect.

I was reading Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust*. I knocked off about twenty pages of it. It was an orange-spined Penguin as well, but an old one bought at one of the green wooden stalls along the quays, as for my own use I didn't need a fresh copy like that gift of *Under the Volcano* for Willy. The houses across Rathgar Avenue turned to silhouettes, the sky pinkened. The Army pensioner in his flat cap and baggy trenchcoat clankingly unlatched the front gate, the light on the front of his ancient Raleigh barely glowing as he pushed the crate around to the back yard. He lived in the rear room that was only two pounds a week, because it offered but a single miniature window, actually an aperture not much bigger than a shoebox.

Was that Faulkner prose, even in this, a supposed minor novel, ever wonderful and as resonant in spots as notes on a cathedral pipe organ? It made me want to type a page or two on my own novel as well, but I didn't. I took a nap, dressed in my sweater and chinos under the coarse brown blankets. Perfect deep sleep too, in the cold.

158 Kimmage Road  
Dublin, Ireland  
April 2, 1971

Mr. Kyle Kaufner  
Sunset Circle #201  
San Antonio, Texas, USA

Dear Mr. Kaufner:  
Thank you again for the kind words about the novel, and yes, there is another one in the works. Here's my signature of sorts, and I have a question for you: Do you really have cowboys in Texas?

Yrs,  
Willy Higgins

I sat in the cramped living room, the floor red linoleum, of the rowhouse in Kimmage. The Smith-Corona was the size of a steamship trunk, set up on the marred wooden coffee table. It was the machine Willy used to type with his left foot, the only appendage that he had full use of because of his cerebral palsy—except, of course, for the *one* other that Shemus, his youngest brother, always liked to kid him about. I was going through the pile of letters and Willy was reading in his own small room in the back. His sister Margaret was at a neighbor's with her kids, and I suspected that her husband Shemus, who also worked for the railroad, were at the local pub already. I had finally and frankly convinced Willy that most of the letters of this kind specifically asking for his signature were probably from autograph brokers, guys who collected strange signatures of anybody from a malcontent who made an assassination attempt to, well, somebody like Willy. Willy was always grateful for his fans, and he

wanted to respond to everybody at first. But now that the book had logged in on the best-seller charts in America for a couple of weeks that summer before, that was out of the question. In any case, I picked out one or two that seemed more than less legitimate to appease him, and I think it was the tone of Mr. Kaufner's letter and the fact that he lived on a road called Sunset Circle in sunny Texas that convinced me that he was honest enough. An old party, probably retired.

There was a great story about Willy's signature "of sorts," an anecdote that quite easily summed up the whole of his stranger-than-strange life. When he was born and his disease first diagnosed, his mother refused to have him put into a government children's home. She refused to believe that the knotting of his limbs meant that there was anything wrong with his mind. So, despite the burden of having an alcoholic husband and kids already sleeping three to a bed, she kept Willy at home, and his brothers dragged him around their playsites—bare dirt lots, even the smoking City of Dublin dump here on this southern edge of town—in a wagon. A teenager, Willy had started to paint and was taken to country fairs all over the hilly nation by an enterprising Kimmage impressario (a pool hustler) as a bit of a sideshow. Willy would paint by holding a brush between his toes, dabbing the little jars of watercolors set up for him to produce personalized greeting cards. Actually, Willy soon developed a local reputation as a serious painter too, with those moody landscapes of the West of Ireland he also did when on trips out there—one, I remember, of white-stucco cottages with yellow thatch roofs, the ocean-blue skies in back revealing an underlying torment, dark and bulging and as crazed as anything in a Van Gogh. He sold some of those paintings, read all he could in all the lonely time he had to kill, contributed short stories to the Saturday sections of the Dublin newspapers at a pound a shot, and after fifteen years finished the novel that he had done so well that it earned him four minutes on the David Frost show in London. (I f-fawked that one completely, z-zeke," he once told me. "Too fawking jarred.") His paintings rose in value, and the story was that a wife of one of the Guinnesses had two unsigned Willy Higgins canvases. She arranged a dinner party for Willy and some of her society friends, unabashedly producing paint for Willy to sign the two pictures, seeing he "just happened" to be at her sprawling country home at the time. The way that the proprietor of the Bailey told the story: "She caught old Willy too late in the evening. He was pretty far gone again, and when he signed the first he just about bloody ruined the thing, the brush in his foot and slopping it over about two-thirds of the canvas. The Guinness dame was keen enough to grab the other just in time. "That should do nicely, Willy," she said, "signing only the one. I'll just hang the two side-by-side and people will catch the idea."

I went back to Willy's room. It smelled of gas from the space heater and invalidic closeness. Willy, seeming very small and almost elflike now, sat propped in his chair with his back to me, reading. He was forty. He had a wiry brown beard and a wiry head of hair, just starting to show a halo of a bald spot; he claimed that baldness was inevitably going to make the matter of his "getting a woman now and then" all the more difficult if it progressed. He wore the brown turtleneck sweater and the brown slacks that his sister, who helped him dress, aptly called his pub uniform. I watched him leaning over to turn the page with his chin (his arms weren't fully developed, though

he could manage to hold the book in the crook of his elbow); I listened to his slow noisy breathing.

"The Lowry book," I finally said. I had given it to him earlier.

"Z-zeke?" He twisted his head to look at me.

"I see you've been reading the Lowry book."

"Zeke, I feel like I've been reading this book all my life."

Could anybody ever say anything better about a book you recommended to him?

Willy agreed that the "old geezer," Kyle Kaufner, surely deserved the signed letter, though, as I said, Willy would probably have signed all requests if somebody hadn't reminded him that enough was enough. Again, they were his fans, as opposed to the "fawking phonies," the actors and the writers at the Bailey, who suddenly made so much of him.

I took off his sock, put the letter on the linoleum floor in there. He deftly lifted up his blue Bic ballpoint, between the big toe and the second one, and almost carved out the letters as I held the page:

WILLY KAUFNER

"For Mr. Kyle Kaufner," I said.

Willy nodded and grinned. "Kyle Kaufner," he repeated.

The local pub was called Flood's. It served the Kimmage project area and was a roomy tavern of a building in the same gray stucco as the neighboring rowhouses. Outside, big neon letters on the roof announced the name, the orange tubes burnt out in spots, the night sky bruised blue-and-lavender above. Something was wrong—"trouble"—as soon as we got there, and predictably enough it had to do with Shemus, that youngest brother.

In a way, Shemus was Willy's own making. Most of the others in the Higgins tribe were living in England now, married and off on their own. In the Kimmage house there was Willy, his sister and her husband and their three kids, Shemus, and occasionally Tom, who was presently working on a three-month contractor as a surveyor's assistant in Liverpool. The money that Willy had made on the book surely wouldn't have been extraordinary for the kind of American writer used to blockbusting best-sellers, complete with the fine print of complicated serial and movie rights clauses, plus all the trappings of a winter home in Brooklyn Heights, let's say, and a summer place on the Nantucket dunes. But for Willy, still living in stark Kimmage, the windfall was sizable, especially when you remembered those several printings in both England and America, all compounded nicely by the fact that according to a recent declaration of the Republic of Ireland's senate, artists were left exempt from taxes. Willy himself had no real idea what to do with the money, except for an occasional trip to England, where there was a girlfriend he saw. So he heaped it on the family. Margaret, a handsome woman still in her twenties with dark hair and oversized green eyes, could certainly ask the local Kimmage butcher for genuine cuts of porterhouse steak now, though there remained something rather pathetic about the thin slice of not-too-red meat that passed

for T-bone in Kimmage. She also had a few fine outfits to wear to the restaurants Willy treated them to, and her kids had all the gifts from Willy, including the first American-style banana-seat bicycles seen in Dublin, I'm sure. Shemus was short and husky, his hair sandy, his mustache a Fu-Man-chu. He was about my age. When the money started coming in, he didn't abandon his pick-and-shovel job on the railroad, but he was good for at least two days supposedly sick a week. His social life still centered around bringing his aluminum case of yellow-feathered darts to Floods nightly (he was on the competition team) for pints with his crew, and on weekends he usually shuttled between there and a nearby disco, decked out in one of his two near-ridiculous Mod suits that he always seemed to be busting out of, the collars on the frilled bright yellow or bright aqua or bright red dress shirts open even if he was wearing a mile-wide tie at his bull's neck. Margaret worried that he was drinking too much with the extra spending. But Willy's reading on it was that at last somebody in their family was getting something of what he wanted while still young, and it wasn't necessarily bad for Shemus, who was the youngest and surely not the brightest. Yes, Willy liked the idea that with Shemus, if nothing else, there was visible evidence that money could buy happiness.

"The man had no right to say that to the jury," Shemus said, stewing. We all sat at a low table. Margaret, her husband, Aidan, Willy in his wheelchair, working on a straw on just a Guinness at this stage, before he would shift into his two-pronged treatment on it and an Irish whiskey.

Shemus' cheek was still bloodily scuffed; he might have lost a button or two on the ruffle-fronted shirt (the scarlet) he was wearing. It seemed that this night's main event had started in the disco—the name recently changed from the Yellow Submarine to Club 2001—and somebody had said something about a girl who dated one of his mates. Willy finally reminded Shemus that in fact Shemus' own racy commentary on the same girl just about a week before hadn't been entirely complimentary. Shemus thought about that for a minute, then smiled with his thoroughly muddy teeth.

"Jaysus, I had almost forgotten that, I had." And with that the entire idea of Shemus having been in the fight seemed to effervesce, and the usual entertainment of a weekend night at Flood's commenced unabated. Understandably, at this stage in the long day, things were starting to blur for me. And despite my having been in boozy Ireland for several months and despite my respect for Lowry's prose, I really never had much affection for going heavy on alcohol. Anyway, I stuck with the fizzy Harps. And I was at that stage where in pleasantly vertiginous contentment, I started snagging on those weird associations, like the way that the rising bubbles in the golden beer made me remember again the little fluid-filled Christmas ornaments that bubbled electrically on the tree in the small peaked wood framed house in our neighborhood in Springfield, Massachusetts, where I had been raised by my grandmother and uncle, a clerk in the records office of the local city hall.

Flood's was loud. I think the confrontation over the accordion was that one man who had brought it there to play some reedy ballads had it taken away from him by another who claimed he could press out the music a lot better; the red bellows of the contraption ripped in the ensuing tug-of-war. I think the problem with the old woman sitting at the bar drinking alone in her winter

coat kerchief was that she had a stroke a while back, and now nobody up there was quite sure whether her current collapse was due to another one. They argued among themselves if they should call an ambulance or just set her outside on a chair for a bit to see if she came to, which would prove that it was nothing more serious than a standard drunken blackout. The latter contingent held sway.

Shemus went off with his darts. Margaret sat with Aidan. She wore what could have been her best wool dress, blue, and what I knew were her best shoes, high dark leather boots in the style that had been big in the States a couple of years before. With his arm around her, quiet, droopy-eyed Aidan seemed so proud. Willy bobbed his head over both his straws now. He talked about Brendan Behan and what a good heart he was, describing in detail favorite episodes from *Borstal Boy*, which I confessed I hadn't yet read. Then he went into his own on-going celebration of F. Scott Fitzgerald. How there wasn't a mischosen word in *The Great Gatsby*, how there probably wasn't a better writer, "when he was on," in all of modern literature, "the fawking R-Russians included, Zeke." And as evidence he offered the scene in the sunnily breezy parlor of the house on Long Island Sound, when Nick comes upon Daisy and Jordan Baker, Daisy's voice whispery like a true angel's, her beautiful, fragile body stretched out in white on the plum sofa, her very presence on the summer afternoon as mysterious as anything in a dream.

Then Willy stopped dead in mid-sip. He looked up with his sea-water blue eyes that were so alive and bright that they seemed to make up for the fact that he had so little control over the rest of his jumpy body; Willy's eyes were maybe more responsible than anything else for the fact that most everybody who knew Willy, I was sure, soon forgot, he was crippled at all.

"Zeke."

"Yeah?"

"Lowry wrote the novel that Scott F-Fitzgerald was trying to write all those years and all those f-fawking rewrites of *T-Tender is the Night*."

And maybe with the rightness of that observation, I slipped out of myself and was almost watching it all. I was looking at me, satisfied. A year before, I had been typing out stories on the rash of stolen tape decks or changes in a block's zoning for the Fall River newspaper. Until I found the guts to chuck it all, fully aware that I had been lucky to get the job in the first place; the managing editor's desk was stacked with applications from recent Harvard grads and even a couple from people with degrees from the legendary Columbia Journalism School. (When he hired me right out of the state college, he had said he liked the idea I had grown up in Springfield, which was like tired Fall River, and also the idea that having come from a college nearby on the Cape, I had added familiarity with the scene.) But I had gone out on my own, and I was not only writing, as I said, my own great novel—about a kid in a Massachusetts mill town like Springfield in the fifties, worrying about the world ending in 1960 when the Pope was supposed to learn some apocalyptic news left in an unopened letter from the nun who had the vision at Fatima—but I was also in love with such a special girl (the Harp made that easy to admit) and I was leading the literary life indeed in what had to be the most special city in the world (the Harp made that easy to believe too).

"Sh-Shemus," Willy said, smiling.

Soon he had a guy twice his size in his rough-and-ready equivalent of a full-nelson, if I remember the terminology correctly from the Saturday matches televised in Springfield when I was a kid.

I am almost forty now, a general insurance salesman in Charlotte, North Carolina. I have three kids, two girls and a boy.

I always thought that coming of age in the sixties had rendered me open-minded on the business of the role of women. And when we had just the two girls I could always say that I was perfectly pleased, and the fact I didn't have a son didn't particularly bother me. But then it gradually became an issue. Alex is two now, with his mother's dark eyes and dark hair. She is of French descent, from Louisiana, and we met not long after I returned from Ireland and tried two more newspaper jobs, before beginning this company's training program. So, with Alex, I am content enough knowing our family is complete.

Of course, I never got too far with Gita, and it wasn't the golf captain from University College who was the obstacle. I later learned that he was indeed a regular companion for her, though in that capacity he was just an obstacle to keep everybody else out there at the campus away from her in between the visits from her Dutch steady boyfriend, an old friend of the family. And, of course, there was never a book. By the time I had left Ireland I had become pretty much convinced that the entire dreamy idea of my being a real writer was something that had only been reasonably sane when I was editing the undergraduate literary magazine, *Analecta*, for my college and when I thought I could impress even the English instructors with my inside knowledge of Lowry and his tortured life, my specialty. I didn't have "it". Did my bragging like a supposed insider to the shopgirl about the Penguin covers being selected by a special full-time editor show that I was more interested in acting like a writer than being a writer, a common downfall? Or did my simple laziness that afternoon when I got back to the unheeded bedsitter and read Faulkner and then dozed, rather than face the proverbial music of actually stringing together subjects and verbs for fiction on my little light-green Hermes show that I simply lacked the stamina, another even more common downfall? Who knows.

Whatever, I don't even miss it, and it doesn't strike me as any real shortfall in my life. Or major, anyway, as compared to the brief and sad affair I had with the woman who still works at the Piedmont Air offices here, right before Alex was born, or not lying to cover for Heinzelman, another agent with the company, when there was that office hearing to investigate his alleged misappropriation of the development funds he was in charge of. To be frank, I am amazed at how much I remember of that single day in Dublin, a day right enough to have started off with my almost stumbling on the vision of the boys playing soccer and the background music of "My Sweet Lord."

There was a mix-up with the cab driver who came to take me back to my place in Rathgar. It must have been close to three in the morning.

Before that, we had all returned to the Higgins rowhouse after leaving Flood's. Willy was in great spirits. (I like to remember him the way he was that night; he had been celebrity enough for his death to make the *Time*



that night; he had been celebrity enough for his death to make the *Time* Milestones column a half dozen years ago, where I had learned of it.) Packed in Aidan's Mini, with the wheelchair tossed on the rack on top and the carry-out bag full of nightcap bottles jammed on my lap, we stopped at the fish-and-chips place in Kimmage center. Aidan took all our orders, and it always amazed me what a full menu you would find at a real "chipper" like this—not just any fish in an order of fish and chips, but your choice of the deep-frying done to cod, smoked cod, ray, or whiting. In the front seat, Willy goofed about my getting to close to laughing Margaret in the back while Aidan was away. Willy then managed to raise that left foot up and trace onto the steamed-over inside of the tiny windshield the initials of his best-selling novel. He laughed out loud himself at that. Back in the living room of the house, we flattened on the coffee table the genuine newspaper the fish and chips came wrapped in—the inner-most layer white paper, however, to prevent ink smudging—and I took no more than a token sip on one of the three bottles of Harp bought especially for me. The vinegar on the sweet grease was pungently aromatic. Aidan and Margaret danced on the red linoleum. They flopped a kind of frug to Cannonball Adderly's "Roll, River Jordan, Roll"; it played on the little 1950's portable Phillips record player, a maroon-and-gray thing fit for the appliance museum. After they went to bed upstairs, I got out one of Willy's shoe boxes full of poems, and he and I took turns reading them aloud. Meanwhile, Shemus, staring straight ahead in his stupor and most likely recreating every move in the two run-ins he had had in the course of what had been just a normal night for him, finally focused through his clouding cigarette smoke and interrupted our impromptu and over-dramatic readings. He said, with honesty: "Zeke, I will admit he has what your man calls talent, but I'll be buggered if I know what the hell the sod is going on about half the time in those things." Willy got a good laugh out of that too. Shemus went up to bed.

I was left alone to maneuver Willy back to his room. He said he would sleep fully dressed, and I pulled the blanket to his bearded chin as he slurred the song "The Travelling People," rather sadly to the darkness.

And, yes, I ended up not in Rathgar, but downtown in Dublin right on O'Connell Street.

"Rathgar?" The driver said, vacantly. He turned around in the boxy old Austin to look at me; that rear compartment must have been as large as some small hotel ballrooms. He had a cap and curly hair, and a broken nose. "Didn't I hear you say the GPO?"

"Ah, I did say Rathgar. Rathgar Avenue, number 57."

"I'm sorry, mate. I've had a hard day of it, and..." He was apologetic, and he almost didn't want to let me leave, saying the ride out to Rathgar would be on him. I suppose I was glad to have the chance to walk some, anyway. I wasn't tired, and I liked the feeling that here I was again back *exactly* where I had started from well over a dozen hours before. It felt refreshingly dream-like; the same scene from daylight was now in the deepest of night. It made one seem real and the other not real—but I had no idea which was which.

I gave the driver the pound note that Willy had made sure I took from his pocket to pay the fare. And I did two strange things that night there in deserted

downtown Dublin.

I didn't cut through the backstreets this time, but I headed right across the O'Connell Street bridge. The bridge spanned the wide, dark water in several leaping white marble arches, and the side railings were carved out of the stone for handsome Georgian banisters. I stopped at its crest. The stars hung like so many matches flickering; the empty city, devoid of any highrises, rose from the purple shadowing. I looked again at the sky.

"Lowry," I said, aloud but low, my hands planted on the railing.

"Lowry!" I shouted this time, and my echo bounced and faded.

"Fitzgerald!" I tried next. The same echoing. Then "Agee!" "Hemingway!" "Faulkner!" It felt so good.

And I was praying, in a way, I suspect. I don't know what to suspect about the door from seven Eccles Street, the way I now went up Grafton Street—as I had done earlier—cut off at that side street to The Bailey, and managed, cupping my hands, to look through one of the panels of glass at the foyer there. I stared at the door, that glassy blackness and its polished brass numeral, almost yellow, and I stared some more.

"The door to the seven Eccles Street," I said to myself. "The goddamn door to seven Eccles Street. Would anybody believe it?"

I wasn't tired in the *least*, and it was close to dawn.



HUGH O'DONNELL

## Lady in Waiting

Day-dreaming by the window  
of her country house, she feels  
the green surroundings inhale  
sharply because summer has gone

and recalls a bright girl chasing  
down to meet the bus from Omagh,  
where now the silly lane lies  
moon-struck awaiting rain;

when the bus appears, it sets  
a neighbour down, but every house  
makes privacy a point of law;  
her thoughts escape, are caught  
up and swirled southwards:  
they run to seed in a prison cell.

BRIAN LENNON

## A Matter of Perceptions; The Northern Conflict

**Y**ou might not think tea parties and Orange parades in Northern Ireland go well together. But you would be wrong. In 1986 there was great tension because of Protestant protests over the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Anna Fowler, a Catholic living in a deprived housing development in Portadown, organised a tea party in the middle of the road to protest Protestant Orange parades being put through a Catholic area by the British army and the RUC—the Northern Ireland police force. Against a background of over 1500 members of the security forces, with hundreds of armoured vehicles, and the triumphalist Orange bands, the tea party had all the elements of a farce. But the aims behind the demonstration were deadly serious. One was to witness to the way that Catholics and Protestants can and should get on together, and so in the small group sitting at the table there were people from many different Churches. A second was to protest against the Orange parade. A third was to show the possibility of non-violent Christian action against injustice.

It was the response of their own Catholic neighbours that caused the group the most fear. What they expected was that most people would laugh at them and see them—at best as naive do-gooders. And that is what happened—at least at first. When the group set up their table the rest of the Catholic crowd—and there would have been anything between 1000 and 2000 people on the street—stayed far away from them. To be seen supporting them would have raised questions about the role of violence and the so-called “armed struggle” carried on by the IRA. It was only when the music started and when Anna Fowler handed around cakes topped with madeira oranges—a quite unintentional pun on the marchers—that the atmosphere relaxed.

Some background information may be useful for American readers: Northern Ireland has been directly ruled by the British Government since 1972. Protestants, or Unionists, have dominated Northern Ireland since it was first founded in 1920. They see themselves as British and want Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom. Catholics, or Nationalists, resent Unionist domination and want a United Ireland. Many commentators take this to mean unity with the Dublin Government, but, as we shall see below, the matter is more complicated.

There are other bones of contention for Catholics beside Orange marches and many of these center around the security forces or the criminal justice system. In recent months there has been the debacle over the Stalker/Sampson affair when several enquiries were set up to investigate an allegation that a special RUC squad had deliberately shot dead several unarmed IRA men—and one innocent civilian—when they could have arrested them. Several RUC officers were charged with murder, but the prosecution case depended on

evidence furnished by the RUC themselves and it collapsed. John Stalker, the Deputy Chief Constable of Manchester, believed there was evidence of obstructing the course of justice by some of the RUC and recommended that charges be brought. The Attorney General in Britain—a political appointee—instructed the Director of Public Prosecution in Belfast that no charges were to be preferred and that the Stalker report was not to be published.

The Stalker affair was but one of a series that—to Catholics—smacked of Dreyfus-like scandals. Others were the killing by the British army of three IRA people—again unarmed—in Gibraltar and the earlier shooting of eight IRA men—this time armed and on a bombing mission—in a prepared ambush by the RUC and the British army at Loughgall, an incident which also led to the death of an innocent civilian. A third row was over the rejection of the Birmingham Six appeal whom many detached observers believe are innocent of the pub murders for which they were sentenced to life imprisonment. A fourth bone of contention was the release of the one British soldier ever convicted for murder in Northern Ireland after he had served only two and a half years of a life sentence.

Perceptions of the conflict in Northern Ireland are at least as important as realities. In fact they are part of the reality. A number of years ago the Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics, of which I am a member, produced a document called *Breaking Down the Enmity*. In the first section the group listed the fears of each community. Some commentators criticised this because no judgment was made about the validity of these fears. One reason why such a judgment was not made was that the group, because it was made up of Catholics and Protestants from both the North and South of Ireland, would have found it very difficult to reach consensus. But they did agree that the fears they described were real to the people who experienced them, and as such they had to be taken seriously if the conflict was ever going to be resolved.

To illustrate this point, look for a moment at the way Protestants might see some of the incidents that have offended Catholics. They would see the Stalker affair as an attempt to charge policemen with murder when in fact the RUC, the majority of whom are Protestants, are only defending themselves against the most vicious terrorist group in Europe and in a situation where the security forces have had nearly 500 members murdered. In this context, to talk of treating terrorists with kid gloves is pure nonsense. The restraints of law are already so great that many terrorists, whom the security forces know perfectly well are guilty of murder, are left to continue with their acts of violence. In the same vein many would see it as unfair to sentence a British soldier to life imprisonment for murder, because of the strain that he is forced to work under, even if he did go beyond the use of minimal force. To compare his case to that of convicted terrorists is to put the IRA on a par with the legal security forces. As regards the Birmingham Six, they would say they were tried by four independent courts, each of whom found them guilty of murder, so it is perfectly appropriate that they stay in jail. All of these perceptions are underpinned by a basic fear experienced by the Protestant community: the fear of annihilation from a combination of sources: the IRA, who are trying

to kill them, the Catholic Church, whom many believe is dedicated to destroying Protestant liberties, and the fear of being coerced into a United Ireland.

Ironically, Protestants see the English as outsiders. In fact one of the great secrets of Northern Ireland that is kept from Catholics is that Protestants often dislike the English more than they do Catholics.

It is a question of perception and the impact of relationships on perceptions. In this instance there is a dependency relationship. Northern Ireland Protestants depend on the British government for security and for financial support and they do not like being dependent. They like it even less when the strong party in the relationship imposes something against their will as the British government did with the Anglo-Irish Agreement in November 1985. The shocking thing about the Agreement for Protestants was that although they had always been dependent on Britain, never before had Britain gone so directly against their will. Even when Westminster had abolished Stormont in 1972—the old local parliament in Northern Ireland dominated by Unionists—that did not mean giving the Dublin government a role. When moves in that direction were made at the Sunningdale conference two years later a general strike by Unionists led to a collapse of the power-sharing executive. The shocking thing for Unionists about the Anglo-Irish Agreement was that Britain actually gave the Dublin government a role in the North and in the end there was nothing Unionists could do about it.

This of course has given great satisfaction to Nationalists, not because they have gained much out of the Agreement themselves, but because of the pain it has caused Unionists. But many Nationalists have missed the point that because of the trauma Unionists have gone through in the past three years they have changed, and changed more than they did in the fifty years preceding the Agreement. Now noises are being made by Unionists about talks. James Molyneaux, leader of the Official Unionist Party, and the Ulster Defence Association, a Protestant paramilitary group, have both made statements about the need to talk to Mr. Charles Haughey, Taoiseach or Prime Minister of the Republic, who has always been a *bête noire* to Protestants.

**“ . . . one of the great secrets of Northern Ireland that is kept from Catholics is that Protestants often dislike the English more than they do Catholics.”**

While Unionists are going through this change Nationalists are increasingly focused on the Dublin government and the Anglo-Irish Agreement as the means through which they will find redress for their grievances, even though the Dublin Government has a purely consultative, not an executive, role under the Agreement. One consequence of this is that Catholics are under little pressure to make compromises that would help the emergence of a new power-sharing arrangement with northern Protestants. (The concept of power sharing means that Catholics, as the minority community, would receive extra votes disproportionate to their number in any devolved government that might

be set up). Indeed most Catholic energy is currently aimed at lessening the divisions that exist within their own community.

Chief of these is the conflict between those who support violence and those who oppose it. At one level the two sides are represented by the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP)—the Nationalist constitutional party led by John Hume and Sinn Fein, which is the political wing of the IRA. Those who support violence define the problem quite simply: it is due to the presence of Britain in Ireland. When they leave Unionists will make a deal with Nationalists. The only way to make the British go is through violence. There is also a strong socialist tinge: Sinn Fein argues that there is need for a totally new society, not the kind of society that exists in the South of Ireland, but a socialist republic. The commitment to this view is real. Those who are active in the IRA are not mindless hooligans, although the acts they carry out are barbaric because of the suffering they cause people. But for them the violence is the only way to end the conflict and “sentimentalists” who refuse to accept this are in their view either willfully supporting the powers that be and opposing the struggle for freedom, or else are not willing to face up to the price that has to be paid for that freedom. Their language is theological: many of the political realities on the island of Ireland and in Britain are simply ignored. So, it matters not that less than 10% of the population of Northern Ireland vote for Sinn Fein and less than 3% in the Republic. It matters not that the vast majority of public representatives from every shade of opinion condemn violence—albeit somewhat selectively. Gerry Adams, President of Sinn Fein can still say that the vast majority of the people in the South support the armed struggle, as long as it is against the British army. And the IRA, when they make mistakes and kill civilians and say their sympathy is genuine, unlike that of other politicians who try—in their view—to make political capital out of tragedies. In prisons like Long Kesh, where IRA men live in segregated blocks—at their own insistence—these perceptions are strengthened and often go unchallenged. This is not to suggest that there is no movement. No group can be entirely isolated and many leave the organization, either because they get tired of the struggle, or else because they believe it is futile, or for religious reasons, but there is solid support and arms available for the IRA to continue in existence for some considerable time.

Recently there have been suggestions of a cease fire, in part because of talks between the SDLP and Sinn Fein. It is dangerous to make predictions in war or politics, but at the time of writing it is hard to see how this will come about. Certainly there may well be increased defections because of the number of people, who even in the eyes of the IRA are innocent, that have been murdered by them in recent months—most notably at Enniskillen, but this is likely to increase pressure within the movement for a concentration on military targets, not for a ceasefire.

**T**he English have been involved in the struggle from the beginning. They remain by far the most powerful group in the conflict—a point that many forget. They make all the laws for Northern Ireland, they control the security forces, they inject over £1700 million sterling annually into the economy and they have immense influence over job creation, much of which is in the public

sector. Yet they clearly see themselves as outsiders and a majority of them are generally in favour of withdrawing British troops from Northern Ireland. Further, Northern Ireland tends to be very low on the agenda in England even of Church groups. There is much effort put into resolving the conflicts in Nicaragua or South Africa, where obviously the level of suffering is much worse than in Northern Ireland. But in those countries Britain has no direct executive responsibility, unlike the situation in Northern Ireland. Part of the reason for English reticence is a reluctance on the part of Irish Churches to see them involved on the grounds that they would not understand the problem—(suspicion of outsiders is prevalent in Northern Ireland). A second reason is that the English Catholic Church tends to divide into an Irish and an English wing, and both sides are embarrassed by the conflict.

The other participant in the conflict is the Dublin Government and here, as with the other groups, contradictions abound. Indeed one summary of the position of the people—as distinct from the Government—of the South is that they want a United Ireland, but not with Northern Ireland. To some extent their position mirrors that of the Northern Nationalists who want a United Ireland—but not with the South. In each case the demand for a United Ireland is an aspiration. As such it remains in the future. It can act as a symbol around which the country can unite. But at no stage are people being asked to make concrete decisions about the practical costs of unity. Thus Northern Nationalists never have to face the prospect of losing the British subvention to Northern Ireland, and the Southern Government never has to spell out how it would make up this shortfall, or how it would deal with Protestant fundamentalists like Ian Paisley in the Dail, nor how it would cope with loyalist paramilitaries.

If there were a referendum tomorrow among Nationalists in the North, my guess is a majority would choose to remain under Britain, because after seventy years of living in Northern Ireland they are psychologically distant from the South, and because they believe, sometimes erroneously, that welfare benefits and economic opportunities are better in the North. But equally they do not want to continue with the present situation which leaves them deprived in many ways. For example, Catholics are two and a half times more likely to be unemployed as Protestants, and because of IRA violence Catholics inevitably tend to come into conflict with the security forces more than Protestants. For them, then, the demand for a united Ireland is not a demand for unity with the South, so much as a rejection of British or Unionist domination, and also a cry of anger at the injustices they believe they suffer from within the North.

However if a referendum were held in the South on the question of removing Article Two of the Constitution, which defines the national territory as the “whole island of Ireland”—thereby including Northern Ireland—a majority of the people would vote to retain the clause. To change the clause would require defining the country in new terms. Any group naturally finds that difficult to do. It would raise basic questions about how South has defined itself for the past fifty years. Such a process would be very valuable in terms of growth but like all growth mechanisms it is difficult to begin. Some sort of process

did start in the South, though, with the Forum for a New Ireland, which was an investigation of the future direction of nationalism carried out by the political parties in the South, together with the SDLP. Their conclusion was that a unitary State was the "preferred option," but that other options should also be considered. It represented a major advance on the verbal republicanism that has dominated Southern political thinking on Northern Ireland since the setting up of the Irish Free State in 1921. But the process started at the Forum needs to be developed and clarified. In particular people in the South need to decide if their first priority is to develop some structure linking the South with the North, or, alternatively, to develop political relationships within the North, a task which might require less Dublin involvement in order to bring Unionists into the political process. As of now it is unclear how Mr. Haughey and his Fianna Fail party stand in relation to this question.

**I**t has been important to describe the perceptions of different groups in the conflict because so often important aspects of these perceptions are ignored and political decisions taken subsequently can do more harm than good. But given the necessarily incomplete description of different group perceptions described here how can the conflict be eased in Northern Ireland?

What is required is a new relationship between Nationalists and Unionists within Northern Ireland. Such a statement may seem banal, but in fact it contains several important assumptions. One is that Northern Ireland is going to continue in existence as some form of political entity. Given the fact that it has existed for nearly seventy years and that the majority of the people in the South want it to continue in existence; and given also that Britain is certainly not going to allow the creation of a political entity inimical to its defence interests a mere twelve miles from Scotland at its nearest point, this seems a reasonable assumption. But it immediately distances this analysis from those who see the future in terms of simple United Ireland.

Secondly it assumes that it is possible to build a relationship between Nationalists and Unionists. Again this assumption arises from the belief that the people of Northern Ireland are no different than people anywhere else. Conflicts are solved either by the annihilation of one of the groups, or by compromise. Each of the groups involved in this conflict is too powerful to wiped out by the other. Geography has ordained that they cannot separate and so compromise is the only alternative.

In political terms this points towards some form of power sharing with Northern Ireland. What does this imply? In a normal democracy the majority are the ones who rule. One reason why the minority accepts this is that in due course they expect the pendulum to swing and that they will become the majority. But in Northern Ireland there is no consensus about the structure of the State and because of population balance Catholics will not form a majority in the foreseeable future. They have had bad memories of Protestant rule from 1920–1972 and they are unlikely to accept simple majority rule again. Power sharing could take many forms. The basic principle is that the minority would participate in decision making. It was tried before, for four months in 1974. Then Catholics were given portfolios in the devolved government set up by agreement with the leaders of the Catholic Social Democratic



and Labour Party and the Official Unionist Party. It failed because of Protestant opposition. But successive public opinion polls have shown that in both communities power sharing is the second most popular choice.

Many of the factors that went to make up the conflict no longer exist. Britain's economic and military interests no longer require the occupation of Northern Ireland, although as I have mentioned they do require the existence of a political regime there that is benign to their interests. Britain has intimated that it wants a new relationship between Catholics and Protestants and that it will not continue to support the dominance of Protestants as happened under the old Stormont Government. Unionists have realised that they can no longer depend on the Westminster government as before and so have started talking about new possibilities. Northern business people have long pointed to the damage done to the economy by the violence. And the fervour in the South for a united Ireland has lessened.

At some stage it is reasonable to speculate that IRA violence is going to decline, either because of disgust among its members over the brutality, or because the futility of the violence will gradually be communicated to those involved.

All of this suggests that we are heading towards a positive resolution of the conflict. Some commentators have been talking as if this is only months away. I do not believe that, but I do believe the basic parameters of a settlement are emerging.

There are three basic ways in which people within Northern Ireland can be encouraged to enter into relationships with each other: one is through political and economic pressure, a second is through a much fuller commitment to the Gospel, and the third is through the right sort of support from abroad.

The effectiveness of the Anglo-Irish Agreement is an example of what can be achieved through political pressure. As we have noted above Nationalist gains from the Agreement have been limited, but the impact on Unionists has been considerable and this has led them to rethink their position, and therefore the possibility of a new relationship. The tragedy is that the British Government did not confront Unionists much earlier with concrete choices which took account of their desire to remain part of the United Kingdom, but which also took account of the wishes of the other inhabitants of the United Kingdom for a settlement and which also recognised the legitimate rights of the minority community within Northern Ireland. Even now it is unclear how far the Westminster government is prepared to go to bring pressure on Unionists—for example in the area of job discrimination—towards an equal relationship with Nationalists.

If the British Government has responsibilities in this area so also have the Irish. The Agreement has changed the relationship between Northern Nationalists and the Dublin government by increasing the sense of dependency among Northerners. It is imperative that the Dublin Government—both for their own sake and that of Northerners—continues to press for power-sharing, and also that it encourages Northern Nationalists to make whatever compromises are necessary in order to arrive at a moderately fair structure of government within the North. This again illustrates why it is so important for

the South to decide on its priorities in relation to the needs of both communities within the North and not in relation to its own status.

Secondly, economic pressure from the United States, in part influenced by the debate over the so-called McBride principles, has led major firms to take some affirmative action in the area of job discrimination. This sort of pressure needs to be increased, but always in a way that takes account of what is realistically possible in the situation and also in a way that maintains its distance from Sinn Féin or any group that supports paramilitaries.

Ireland, both North and South, has some of the highest Church-attendance figures in the world. This, together with the use of the words "Catholics" and "Protestants" has led many people to assume the struggle is a religious one. It is not, but religion plays an important—and often negative—role in it. Among Protestants there is a high degree of fundamentalism. One element of this is the belief that in order to be saved one must be "born again." Many believe it is impossible for Catholics to go through this experience and remain part of what is seen as an heretical Church. Thus Catholics are seen as people heading towards hell fire. Secondly, there is a good deal of stress on Romans 13:1-7, which talks about the duty of Christians to obey the rulers of the State. Since the setting up of Northern Ireland as a political entity in 1920, it is Catholics for the most part who have been disobedient to the rulers of the state—because they thought they were bad rulers—and Protestants who saw themselves as obedient. This religious outlook of many Protestants is not one designed to encourage them to enter into political arrangements with Catholics. But it probably did help to keep the lid on Protestant anger when the Anglo-Irish Agreement was imposed.

Among other Protestants, who see the gospels as a challenge to all out values and practices, there is a strong commitment to questioning Unionist political values. It is much more difficult for Protestant ministers to do this than it is for Catholic priests. The latter are not subject to the pressures of vestries or elders, and they do not have children who can be intimidated, for example, at school. Those Protestant ministers who have taken a stance by criticising members of their own community have often paid a heavy price.

**"Unless the perceptions held by different groups in the Northern conflict change, a new and constructive relationship will not emerge."**

Religion plays a different role with Catholics. The Church is highly clericalist, all important decisions being made by the clergy. At the same time the influence of clergy in political issues is very limited. They can—and many do—give a lead in challenging sectarian attitudes. They can, and often will, condemn violence. But sermons will tend to stress the need to love God, without going into the practical implications of that for citizenship. In fact the question of the duties of citizenship is one that simply does not occur to most Northern Irish Catholics. Nor does it occur to many that this question should arise out of religious belief. The State is seen as an alien force with which one

has to do day-to-day business. Religion is a separate matter and the two should not be allowed to mix. One takes one's religion from Rome, but one's politics from home. An example of this attitude was the reaction of one of my neighbors—a supporter of Sinn Féin—when he read *Breaking Down The Enmity*: “I think your politics are nonsense, and I don't know why you brought all that religion into it.”

The challenge, then, for Catholics, is to take on board some of the central thrusts of the Gospel about making peace and forming new relationships based not just on justice for oneself, but justice for Protestants and British people also. This is a much wider agenda than that normally proposed by outsiders—changing the Church's attitude to integrated education, mixed marriages and intercommunion. These matters are important in themselves, but inevitably any changes in Catholic rules about them would affect only a minority of people directly. However the real impact of changes in these areas would be on the self-understanding of the Catholic Church as a whole in the North.

For example, take the rule that the Catholic partner in a mixed marriage has to promise to do all in his or her power to bring children up as Catholics. If parents were allowed to make their own decisions—after being confronted about the issues involved—this would show the Church was putting the value of respecting members of other Churches above the value of trying to have children brought up as Catholics. In Ireland, where the need for reconciliation is a priority, such a choice would seem appropriate because it would ease interchurch tensions, and lessen the scandal of interchurch divisions.

The second area where a new emphasis might be appropriate for Catholics is in developing a theology of citizenship. It is the lack of reflection on faith and politics *together* that is blocking the emergence of such a theology and this is perhaps the most crucial area of growth that is required. This does not mean that Church leaders have to issue more statements on political issues, but that all the Church members try to develop a process whereby political issues are examined both in the light of the gospels and of prayer, and also through ecumenical dialogue.

**T**he third way in which pressure could be brought on Northern Irish people to enter into relationships with each other is by people in other countries becoming more informed about the situation, raising questions about what it means to be Irish and what it means to be British, looking seriously at justice issues, and making sure their investments are used wisely.

Last St. Patrick's Day I was privileged to be one of an ecumenical delegation that was invited to the San Francisco Bay area to give a series of talks on Northern Ireland. As part of the programme we were invited to the flag-raising ceremony in Mayor Agnos's office that officially opened the week's festivities. One of my fellow travellers, Billy, a Protestant from the Shankill Road in Belfast, was finding the “green Irish” emphasis on the tour increasingly difficult to take. With relief he told me that the uniform of the bagpipe players was almost the same as the ceremonial dress of Ulster Defence Regiment (the British army regiment that Northern Irish Catholics most love to hate). With that the pipers broke into the strains of *A Nation Once Again*—a song regarded

by many as the unofficial national anthem of Republicans. Billy sighed. And he sighed further as the green tricolour was raised. This was a day to celebrate his homeland. But his flag and his tradition were not going to be honored. In fact many of the Americans Billy met were nonplussed when he told them he was a Protestant. Real Irish people in America on St. Patrick's Day are supposed to be Catholics, even though there are one million Protestants living on the island.

Americans could help the situation by challenging those of us living on the island of Ireland about our own self-image. This might mean developing new ways of celebrating St. Patrick's Day in the United States. It might make the day a more serious one. It might involve looking at the flags that are used to celebrate being Irish. It might mean looking at ecumenical considerations in worship. And it might mean raising different questions about who are the victims in this conflict: not just Nationalists living in poor areas, but also Protestants in poor areas, members of the security forces who are murdered by the IRA, and the whole Protestant community in Northern Ireland who are faced with the task of redefining their identity.

Unless the perceptions held by different groups in the Northern conflict change, a new and constructive relationship will not emerge. Without such a relationship there will be neither peace nor justice on the island of Ireland. Billy's people deserve a place in the sun in Northern Ireland. So do Anna Fowler's people. Utopia is not what is required. But new political and economic structures are needed that will enable people to engage in the sort of constructive conflict that is necessary in any society.



LELAND BARDWELL

## Them's Your Mother's Pills

They'd scraped the top soil off the gardens  
and every step or two they'd hurled a concrete block  
Bolsters of mud like hippos from the hills  
rolled on the planters' plantings of the riff-raff of the city.

The schizophrenic planners had finished off their job  
folded their papers, put away their pens—  
The city clearances were well ahead.

And all day long a single child was crying  
while his father shouted: Don't touch them,  
Them's your mammie's pills.

I set to work with zeal to play "Doll's House,"  
"Doll's life," "Doll's Garden"  
while my adolescent sons played *Temporary Heat*  
in the sitting room out front  
and drowned the opera of admonitions:  
Don't touch them, them's your mammie's pills.

Fragile as needles the women wander forth  
laddered with kids, the unborn one ahead  
to forge the mile through mud and rut  
where mulish earth-removers rest, a crazy sculpture.

They are going back to the city for the day  
this is all they live for—  
Going back to the city for the day.

The line of shops and solitary pub  
 are camouflaged like checkpoints on the border  
 the supermarket stretches empty  
 a circus of sausages and time  
 the till-girl gossips in the veg department  
 Once in a while a woman might come in  
 to put another pound on  
 the electronic toy for Christmas.

From behind the curtains every night  
 the video lights are flickering, butcher blue  
 Don't touch them, them's your mammie's pills.

No one has a job in Kilenarden  
 nowadays they say it is a no go area  
 I wonder, then, who goes and does not go  
 in this strange forgotten world  
 of video and valium.

I visited my one time neighbour  
 not so long ago. She was sitting  
 in the hangover position  
 I knew she didn't want to see me  
 although she'd cried when we were leaving  
 I went my way  
 through the quietly rusting motor cars and prams  
 past the barricades of wire, the harmony of junk.  
 The babies that I knew are punk-size now  
 and soon children will have children  
 and new voices ring the *leit motif*:

Don't touch them, them's your mammie's pills.

AIDAN HIGGINS

## Two from Ronda Gorge

### I: Gas in the Decompression Chamber

Few in their right minds could doubt that reality is two-thirds illusion in Iar-Connacht, the The-Bays-of-the-Ocean called Connemara. The Maamturks loom and recede, appear only to vanish, an optical illusion. The nights are still as the grave. Terrain so marine in nature, so embattled in history (defeat for the Irish), is entitled to its grave silence. But foxes are returning over the causeways built in Penal days, into Bealadangan, An-naghvaughan, Gorumna, Lettermore. The ghost of Sir Roger Casement coughs at night in the Hotel of the Isles, as the Atlantic wind rushes through the palm tree outside, and a miserable coal fire dies in the grate.

He dreamed of a free Ireland, a nation once again; confided to his diary: "A world nation after centuries of slavery. A people lost in the Middle Ages refound, and returned to Europe" But Ireland would never be part of Europe. An earlier historian noted: "Thus separated from the rest of the known world, and in some sort to be distinguished as another world." One female slave for three milch cows and six heifers. Between bouts of harsh coughing, Casement wrote: "Individually the Englishman might be a gentleman, but has no conscience when it comes to collective dealing. Collectively the English are a most dangerous compound, and form a national type that has no parallel in humanity." Waiting for him at their hands: the hangman's noose, Pentonville lime, posthumous disgrace. He liked dressing up, adopting disguises, travelling on false passports. He whitened his face with flour, buttermilk, travelled in a German U-boat with a cargo of sanitary pipes, was over-sond of his body-servant, Adler Christensen, a man "of atrocious moral character" wanted by the New York police.

Yesterday I watched a jackdaw being buffeted on a bough of the sycamore in Johnny O'Toole's well-set windbreak, cawing in annoyance or delight, who can say? Today, a loud assembly of crows there.

The low black devil-dog up the road, who had barked and run away, today crept onto the wall and suffered itself to be patted on the head—an even odder-looking beast when seen close up. A little girl emerged from the model Connemara house. Was it her little dog? Indeed it was. Its name? Elvis.

The O'Tooles were weeding in the windbreak. "What's this ugly-looking thing growing over here?" Lucy asked her husband, the publican, raconteur, chain-smoker, historian, horticulturist and Fine Gael man. "Nothing that grows is ugly."

True enough. But little enough grows in Connacht (at least three-fourths of which is less than one hundred feet above the level of the sea), barring ancestral grievances. Lucy's father was a publican too, O'Connor of Salthill,

doubtless related to the old ruling sept of O'Connor, former masters of Connacht.

"Whiskey" the Connemara pony stands all night sleeping in the frozen paddock, tail to the wind. In a remote bar in boulderstrewn Drim I was searched by three youths who said I was an armed UDA man, and they were Provos. Or Cowboys. The door was thrown open, I saw the darkness without. They pointed. In this out-of-the-way region, Ireland's old grudges take on some reality. But who is friend and who is enemy? Where in Iar-Connacht, the Celtic Katyn, does the old resentment end? "Shoot the fucker!" a tall fellow stinking of draught Guinness bawls into my ear-lug. "Down with the fucker!" The small devious smiling barman who had spoken with some feeling of King Herod's maggoty corpse, says "Shushh!" but doesn't mean a word of it, taken with this display of patriotic ire.

"Shoot him! Shoot him!" howls the patriot, pint in hand, safe in this region of Provo sympathizers. The humid smoke-filled bar is in uproar. Cromwell and his dragoons ride down the unfortunate Pierce Ferriter, dispatch him with a sword-thrust through the third rib. Falling in slow motion Gibson of Ulster is tackled by a group of English defenders. Ireland are losing again, having defeated Scotland, and now face the old foe, who seem better trained, cooler headed, calculating, building their attacks. "Get in the boot!" The narrow old bar by Lynch's Castle is steamy as a Turkish bath. Ward of Limerick is too late to take the pass, and down goes Gibson.

Then, breaking free from the ruck, the giant Kerry footballer Moss Keane takes possession and sets off alone for the enemy line, feeling Sassanach to left and right; an awesome sight, and the bar goes wild. The dense air is friendly yet hostile, a *distilled* hostility. I drink hot toddies with cloves, half pints of Guinness. The rugby players seem to be struggling underwater, the scrums agitating the seabed.

Extraordinary clarity of the firmament above the little pier; in our Galaxie those remote small starres do reel in the Skie. In the morning the two hunting seals will come with the incoming tide. At night the air is pure crystal oxygen into the lungs.

Old Brendan Long of Dingle spoke of "air currents." Tommy Durkhan said that when the sun went down in clouds over Lettermore Hill, it would rain tomorrow; and so far has proved right. In the sodden west the low clouds constantly discharge rain onto the land, swans are upended in the small tarns that become lapis lazuli before stupendous sundowns, created by God or the moisture-laden Atlantic seaboard air.

There is a wren at the door. The place is cold but wholesome. There is a young bird on the water. The man is generous. God is generous. Una is well. The hound is young. The well is clean. Leave a big stool at the door (*Simple Lessons in Irish.*) Wishing to be well; not exactly ill. Wishing to be ill, when not exactly well. Fog and mist mixed, darkening, and as far out as the wind that dried your first shirt.

Now, framed eerily in the small inset window, a greenish face appears behind rain-bespattered glass, under a greenish pork-pie hat at least one size too small for the head, and long-suffering greyish eyes look sorrowfully into the early morning obscurity of the odorous bedroom where the hessian-covered wall by the bed-head hides the stains caused nightly by the previous



owner, a bachelor farmer, in violent projectile vomiting of Guinness over an unknown period of time. The window is open a foot, the morning cold comes in. A fine rain falls like some distress of the viscera.

"Your brother!"

We had arranged to meet by the bridge. The Morris Minor needed attention from the part-time mechanic who worked below the bridge in a graveyard of rusty car-parts. A pig named Emily was eating cow dung. Scraping with his fingernail on the glass, greenish tinged, my brother was so kind as to inform me that one of the cows was bleeding from an udder. I saw the sad profile, the unfortunate sodden headgear; a rain-drip depended from the narrow ill-coloured nose. Under one arm he carried a roof-slate. Behind him the needles of rain.

Well as a matter of plain fact I had no intention of even venturing out. The rain was slanting in against the thatch, the Maamturks had quietly betaken themselves elsewhere, with flocks of sheep reduced to the size of lice on their flanks. In the sodden west the overhand of clouds was once again leaking rain. Am I or am I not the same person whom I have always taken myself to be? A hundred times no. Brother C. had as a child a fancy to be a bird, a crow say. We had tamed a jackdaw, converted a biscuit tin into a bird-bath, and in this the fastidious creature bathed daily. Now the rats were frolicking at night in the kitchen, until one big buck rat electrocuted itself in the fridge. The stench beggars description. They were carousing on the dregs behind An Hooker, sole owner and proprietor, Johnny O'Toole, a man with an acid tongue, when he cared to use it.

The Mental Health Week in Ireland would end, as per advertised programme, at the Great Southern Hotel in Galway, with a Medical Ball. Charlie ("Hot Lips") Haughey, Minister for Health and Social Welfare, would attend. By a chain of accidents I found myself in the thick of it, having dined that night in the Claddagh Grill on the Sixth floor, with a view of Galway Bay through the steamed-up bay window. Some Americans were dining there. Warm white wine, poor service, tasteless fish fresh from the bay, stained table-cloth, the tally not cheap. I went down in the lift and found them gathering below, the medical clan, the wives and sisters and friends. Below the bust of a cantankerous Roderick O'Connor in the lobby the typed notice was up.

#### DEPARTMENT OF ANAESTHETIC HYPERBOLIC UNIT

A demonstration of the Decompression Chamber would be held, God willing, at 10 a.m. on Saturday October 22nd. Recompression (*sic*) Chamber.

By midnight the lone diner who had polished off his dinner with an Irish coffee (*de rigueur* for the *arriviste*) was thoughtfully blowing his nose into a large clean linen handkerchief under the clock in the lobby, Paddy in hand, confused by the hubbub of the medical convention now in full assembly. The excited wives, smoking like paddle-steamers, were getting into their stride. The bearded bust of the patriot O'Connor thoughtfully studied the carpet design, two harps emblazoned on a field of green. Wined and dined elsewhere the wives were already in great form. A serious father carried his small son, in pyjamas, up to bed. A group of merry-makers were flabbergasted to run into a group of friends.

"Patcheen!"

"Hairy!"

"Aw Jaysus"

"Dja'know Petchunia?"

Observe the provincial social mill, Irish among Irish, all friends here.

"Vinnie, ary a goen upsteers?"

"Whass upsteers?"

"Dancen"

Sober men smoking Sherlock Holmes pipes occupy the lounge, amid the gild and green. The ice will give out long before midnight. Constricted about the hip and bust in Hellenic-style ball-gowns that expose white backs and arms, the wives appear to be in a perpetual froth of excitement, riggish charmers, knowing the minister to be there; rushing from lift to lobby, from bar to lounge, they might just run into him. (But someone was already having a word in his ear; the hooded ophthalmic eyes, vote-catching eyes, looked elsewhere, the head angled to receive a confidence.) Never trust a man with double vents. An employee in green uniform carried a zinc bucket past.

"God forgive me, that's all I'll say"

"There's no sparks in my lighter!"

The country doctors, no strangers to women in distress, imperturbable men well accustomed to visiting ladies' bedrooms, pass nonchalantly from foyer to bar, or from bar to lounge, ball of malt in hand. Later a glass in *either* hand. Bareback ladies in geranium and raspberry chiffon, with great shoulders white as statuary, faces flushed with spirits and high excitement, take up strategic positions. The minister (smaller than imagined, dapper as George Raft) would surely pass. He was a ladies' man.

Male hotel employees whisper to female employees in green as they pass into a darkened dining-room. A backless strawberry chiffon speaks to a grass chiffon (monumental). Men in dinner-jackets walk on the balls of their feet. Green and raspberry chiffon mingle with the mauve and cowslip yellow (a mistake with orange hair), one lady carrying what appears to be a bicycle pump.

"Dermot Kelly-Ann Seymour"

"Would you like a glass of something? ... a glass of orange or something?"

An old-style hooded pram, with a baby asleep in it, is pushed from the lift at 1:45 a.m., well past a baby's bedtime. The reception lounge is emptying. Roderick O'Connor stares down morosely on emblazoned harps. Chiffon and escorts begin to ascend a long flight of stairs leading to the ballroom above. A buxom wife with fur draped across two-tone off-green hurries through, all business, after the manner of Garbo striding to the elevator in *Grand Hotel*, preceded by bellhops bearing floral tributes. An employee in morning-blue jacket and black trousers with razor creases carries through a full bucket of water. The doctor with the Don Ameche moustache who had not moved all night, wedged between chiffon and chiffon, is *still* drinking vodka and orange. A red bow tie meets a suavely affable priest. The great bulk of the faithful are ineffable. The hooded pram is pushed into the darkened dining-room. The last of the dancers have disappeared up the ascent. Frisky music issues thinly from the ballroom. Since ten past midnight, when the minister, summoned by an aide from without (someone was whispering in his ear again), had

departed unobtrusively for Inishvickillane, the Medical Ball has been gathering momentum.

"Don't *attempt* to go, Eugene!"

"Second row? Ho-ho-ho!"

"Second row for *Ireland*"

"Aw Jaysus"

Lobby and lounge are emptying. The women rock on their high heels as though tormented. Room 133 is flooded. A foreign-looking beauty with brown back and fine shoulders is twisting her hips on the sofa, adopting dangerous Theda Bara poses. The Irish-coffee man, still alone, is downing short ones.

"It's never happened to me"

"He was with you an Tony"

"The last dance or was it the first?"

"You haven't seen my Kathleen have you?"

"Nooooo.."

"I'm interested in all Kathleens but my own Kathleen would do."

A heavy wife has capsized onto an empty sofa and seems in need of air. It's her room that's flooded. A fussy widow stands before her. "My room's flooded as well."

"No!"

"I'll go straight up."

"You'll do no such thing."

The spoilsport with legs outstretched is fit to be tied; her complexion high, this has happened before.

Ah, Galway.

The town was founded by the de Burghs in the thirteenth century. In 1498 the curfew was introduced. In 1641 the townspeople were all English. Lord Mayor Richard Brown assured Bingham the governor of Connacht that the loyal citizens would "until the last gasp sustayne all miseries and distresses" to defend it. Cromwell's dragoons stabled their horses in the empty houses. The Plantation was arranged by ghosts. Rent had always been high there.

"He told me he was interested in buying a house. I told him no way, there wasn't a chance."

"How about you an me haven lunch?"

"White socks?"

A press photographer, a seedy Dick Crossman who had arrived late and half cut, is now carefully arranging a group of smirking ladies and laughing gentlemen against a wall, for a commemorative group photograph. Though none are sober, male hands are careful not to touch bare female flesh. Four pints of Harp are carried through by two stout drinkers, frowning.

"We're dyen to see the dance."

"Is Hilary there?"

"You're crooked."

"Andy will sort ye out."

"Mebbe."

"No maybe about it."

The ball is ending, the reception desk empty, the hotel staff gone home. It's difficult to get a drink. Mad Meg Magee has arrived, a mighty figure of flushed outrage, come late from some brisk business in Kells. The head waiter is in a

huff and refusing to take orders. The bar seems to have been squirted with water. The barmen look as if they have been wrestling, the place deserted but for the usual last carousers, deep in some argument concerning horses. Lobby and Lounge are slowly emptying. From an armchair a lady in astonishing electric blue wishes to discuss amateur drama with me. She comes from Nenagh (opening wide her basilisk eye). Nenagh, haunt of dreams!

It's raining in Eyre Square as if it would rain there forever. In the old days the gypsies fought. In O'Flaherty's B & B, where the Aranmen stay, the beds are hard as penance. The pickpockets too have gone home. Glistening blackly two powerful cannons point at the ivy frontage of the Galway branch of the Bank of Ireland, the handsomest in the land.

"Oh dear God, it's spilt out of the heavens!"

"See you next year."

"Be good now."



## II. A Crack in the Distributor Head\*

Cuckoos have been seen but not heard. The swallows return in fewer numbers each spring, now that the barns are torn down. But daisies still come up in the eleven graveyards, one for paupers and a nice little one for the nuns. Some are closed, packed out, don't you know. The Bleeding Horse public house may reopen near Mullaghmast.

### RÉSUMÉ 1

To return again to childhood haunts is to retreat into a land that has become unreal and *hermetically* disturbing. A paler shade of grey prevails there. For such a lost soul as your correspondent, whelped nearly fifty years ago not thirty Irish miles away, Athy is best entered in the evening, privily viewed in the gloaming.

The living population (some 5,500 souls) seems stupefied, as if by some shock or wrong done to the collective psyche long ago.

A male hand passes me a note. I read in "prentice backhand:

*O'er the rath of Mullaghmast  
In the solemn midnight's blast  
What bleeding spectres passed  
With their gashed breasts bare!*

The Pale-ground is of course as no other in the land, was and still is as a "place or state of rest called Limbo"; for time has stopped here, on the south-west corner of Co. Kildare, at more or less the limit where Irish decency

\*An eightfold innuendo: *crack* (Irishism), great gas, unbridled merriment; *crack*, a blow, an attack; *crack on head*, Donnybrook Fair fight; *crack in head*, the ill-governed land; *cracked wall*, Ireland falling; *crack in distributor head*, malfunctioning engine, by implication "modernized" Ireland; sex-maddened modern Ireland, *Kopflust*, Kathleen ni Houlihan grown sluttish; *crack* (vulgar), vulva, vagina.

could still survive.

A most grudging spring daylight shines here after the long foul winter and the people are pale as ghosts in late April, the time for Punchestown Races and the seventieth anniversary of the Easter Rising. The previous summer was the worst in living memory, and February the coldest since God knows when.

The Irish, being by nature a contrary lot, were always adept at pulling down whatever England had seen fit to erect on Irish soil—not excluding the capital—but; I ask you, how can a small town that has died *five times* up to the middle of the fifteenth century still be alive today? Miracles never cease.

As a loving mother may lavish special attention on an ailing child, so the still-unextinguishable *habitantes* of Athy love Athy, with its barely-malting silos, Tegral steel-rolling, in this hub of the barley-growing area with 1,100 unemployed. Borden of Canada is here, and so too is Klaus Schmidt in the catering trade, while young Bradbury owns the Leinster Arms Hotel as well as the bakery across the road.

I was shut out of my hotel room in the Leinster Arms one Sunday night after closing time. The tall receptionist had given me the wrong key. The place was deserted and the bar closed, the shutters down. Far away a figure appeared.

“What strange people we are.”

“How did the boxing go?”

“It went well.”

In Doyle’s a small dumpy unsober woman was taking Paddy and lemonade and attempting to waylay stray males on their way to the shadowy Gents.

“The daffodils is droopin” she tells me.

“I reared yiz all!” she calls to a male back flinching away.

“FF goes back to its roots,” claimed a sub-leader of the *Irish Press* in a thick provincial accent; but where else would FF go? Seasonal work is still available on the bog. The Bog Allen is finished, but there is talk of extensive vegetable-growing in the rich bog soil. There is also talk of a facelift and coat of paint for the Leinster Arms. The coldest February preceded the wettest March and January was miserable; now in late April the Barrow is rising and the swallows still absent.

Pale spectres of warriors long dead stray by the muddy Barrow stream, cracking their finger-joints and cursing under their breath, waiting for the trout-rise, watching for poachers, or some sign of human life. Cattle are “brawling with hunger” in the sodden fields, dying in a bovine famine. The evergreens are turning brown, the short grass decaying. If you knock down a swallow’s nest the cows will milk blood.

The semi-deserted bars blare out tellynews augmented by transistors not always turned down. Two coloured boxers square up to each other on a silent screen. Cowboy Reagan squares up to Colonel Gaddafi not so silently, while Senora Safia gives the thumbs-up sign to photographers and swears vengeance on the US pilot who destroyed their home, killed a fifteen-month-old adopted daughter, in the air-strike sent out from England. Blame Thatcher too.

## RÉSUMÉ 2

Athy was originally Norman, a market town on the Kilcullen–Castlecomer road, the old highway from Dublin to the south; until it passed by marriage to the house of Kildare. Edward Bruce sacked it in 1307, the Irish themselves having had a go at it seven years previously.

In 1420 the Earl of Desmond did much slaughter to the army of the O More at the Red Moor of Athy, the sun obligingly standing still for three hours in the heavens. It fell to Eoghan Rua O'Neill himself in 1645; to Oliver Cromwell's troops five years later.

Nothing much has happened since, until John Minihan photographed the wake of Katy Tyrrell in 1977. He had studied the technique of Curtis who had recorded the decline of the North American Indians, another race deprived of their own land and rights, from 1896 to 1930. "Death is the beginning," wrote John fatalistically. The only Happy Hunting Grounds would exist in a re-charged afterlife, or in the Indian head itself.

*At last though heard the fearful wail  
That o'erloads the sullen gale*

O'erloads? Anything for a bad rhyme, or a sullen quatrain  
*As the waning moon shines pale  
On the curs'd ground there.*

Curs'd? The usual quota of cornerboys snigger at junctions here, prop up the corners, catcall at out-of-town drivers, stare in a hostile fashion at strangers, that is to say, anybody not from hereabouts. There are two sides to Athy. An entrance *and* and exit?

The price of funerals has gone up. Some fifty years ago it might cost you 3 pounds with pipe, tobacco and poteen thrown in. Now a slap-up funeral would cost you 1000 pounds, with coffin, hearse and mutes.

"I had a busy day. Two funerals."

"Shure *that's* only pleasure."

"Slagging (or messing") is a popular local pastime, as darts elsewhere. Even the station sign looks broken: ATH I.

But no more than Bradbu. Or no stranger than Ophthalmic Optician. Or Ann's Betting Place. The sniggering cornerboys jeer openly at cyclists who pass, dressed for winter, blue in the face on antiquated push-bikes, passing between the two bridges. The Barrow bridge is named Cromabu after the Fitzgerald war-cry; the Augustine bridge crosses the Grand Canal where no swans paddle, and a plaque above shows a monkey with a child in its arms.

Does Athy dream bad dreams?

The Annals of Athy ceased recording ages and ages ago.

There is of course a Provo bar. And the Hole in the Wall gang had *Gruppensex* with a minor in a graveyard, did time in the Joy. Rumour (the greatest of all whores) has it that the girl went willingly. The Club Inn is rocking with boredom. Two punters up (or down) for Punchestown Races are lashing into two well-tortured chickens covered in some kind of sauce and drinking nothing stronger than water in the dining-room of the Leinster Arms.

"Eat away there and give me a shout when you're ready."

A group of habitual messers are enjoying convivial backchat, messing and slagging away in the snug at Bertie (RIP) Doyle's on Woodstock Street between

the two bridges, know colloquially as *Straid Choill an Chip*, the Street of Rain in my time there. An old black-and-white photo shows a pulley and tripod hoisting a haycock onto a car in pre-bogey days, in hilly Tinnanealy, Co. Wicklow.

The two coarse eaters are still stuffing it in. The Provo bar looks dead from outside, but you never can tell. *Supergrass* is showing at the Grove. The municipal baths crowded with excited kids. Articulated trucks squeeze by the Leinster Arms where the pretty and vivacious young Mrs. Palmer won't stop gassing, with little daughter Claudine and mother Lil, in the lounge bar, stared at by a silent Kerryman who lives rough, and won't talk.

"Any sign of Anna?"

"Anna was at Mass."

"On her own?"

"I couldn't say for sure."

Outside, a thin fretting rain falls like penance, and as though it intended to rain forever. Laois (pronounced "leash") have defeated Dublin, and the final in Croke Park will be a "sea of blue and white," or so says a tellysportsman in a rhapsodic spurt of purple prose.

"I'd say it's down for the day."

"Were you out last night—no?"

Young Michael Harrington is laying a one pound bet on *Any Which Way* to win, for an unseen punter glued to the tellyraces in the back bar of Doyle's, where the messing and slagging continue unabated.

"You have to more or less keep up with the times," a cheery male voice says, or else fall behind."

"It's freshenin' up a bit."

The persistent rain falls at an angle on sodden Athy.

A pleasing novelty here (live population five and a half thousand still, give or take a few, dead population unknown) is that your pint-imbibers *do not read newspapers*. A behatted man with one enlarged glass eye stares critically into his pint, like an eagle coldly surveying the plains teeming with game.

The grey station looks closed-up as a prison. No trains will ever pass through ever again. I am here for life.

*The man who drives an ambulance*

*Is not engaged in fun . . .*

I read near the door at Doyle's pub. Lines penned by ex-ambulance driver Des Keogh. Walter Hurley sprawls at the bar.

"The lowest form of life on God's earth!"

A flat unaccented accent suits the men of the Kildare plains. Here they cannot allow their hopes to rise too much. History has branded them as malcontents. Patriotism in this walled-in and hedged-off enclave has always been a melancholy matter; but then Irish nationalistic fervour has always been tinged with an ancestral sadness. Betrayers and informers hide behind every corner.

Now Julia Mahon, with two buckets of pigswill slung over the handlebars of her High Nelly, is off again to talk to her mother in St Michael's cemetery.

"It's freshenin' a bit outside."

"Begod an' it's not."

I am set upon near closing time in Doyle's by a small malcontent who seems to be under the impression that he is in the very presence of the Arch Enemy (Mr George Henry Oliver Sassanach Esq. himself, with horns), waving a cigarette in my face, rocking on the soles of his shoes, intent on being offensive.

"Are you English or are you Irish?"

On his upper lip a growth of hay-coloured moustache. Shure that Noel Dunne fella wouldn't hurt a flea.

"Do you tell me that now. And where do you come from yourself?"

"*A ripa ulteriore. From the further shore.*"

### RÉSUMÉ 3

The cuckoo, pretty bird, should surely be heard, not seen? And even greyhounds will turn on you in your own back yard, having no sense of smell. Had not three such, two muzzled, all three in greyhound-jackets, fixed upon me their accusing stare opposite Ann's Betting Shop? And of course there are two sides to most things, including Athy. And what's it a sign of when you see a woman making off with a monkey in her arms?

"Welcome home, stranger!"

But soon I was passing through Co. Kilkenny where a fresher air was blowing over the land and the frisky Nore was flowing under splendid old stone bridges, the low Brandon Hills as ever a backdrop gliding by, Mount Leinster somewhere to the right and now receding, a hawk flying over a field, the cattle lying down or standing, incomprehensible announcements coming over the tannoy announcing stations in outer Patagonia, but soon we were pulling into Cill Choinnig and my journey over.







## Book Marks

Conor Cruise O'Brien

### *Passion & Cunning: Essays on Nationalism, Terrorism and Revolution.*

New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988.  
293 pp. \$18.95

Reviewed by  
John P. Rossi

The essay format is not flourishing today outside the ephemeral world of popular culture. But a few great practitioners of this deceptively difficult literary genre are still writing. One of the best is Conor Cruise O'Brien, that rare breed of academic, journalist, and literary provocateur. His latest collection of sixteen essays entitled *Passion & Cunning*, shows him in his various guises: at times provocative, pugna-cious, wrong headed, charming but almost always interesting.

This collection essentially comprises his writings since 1985 on topics as varied as Irish politics and literature, the academic boycott of South Africa, the Nicaraguan revolution, Zionism, as well as his thoughts on nationalism and terrorism. There is really no unifying theme; there can't be for a writer who has taken much of the modern world for his stage. As a result, *Passion & Cunning* suffers from all the problems of a loose union of themes. The best essay, O'Brien's brilliant analysis of Yeats' political views (from which the book's title comes) is al-

ready famous. It was published almost 20 years before the other pieces and is really out of place. It is also the best single piece in this disparate collection.

As everyone knows by now O'Brien is a brilliant controversialist, the best I believe since the passing of Dwight Macdonald. He can make a case, provoke a reader, develop an argument or just turn a topic inside out better than anyone writing today. Unlike Gore Vidal he is not a literary poseur but the genuine article. Even so this collection, while worth a read, is flawed.

The Yeats essay is brilliant, arguably one of the most influential literary critiques written in the last quarter century. He takes a theme much discussed, Yeats' politics, and renders it fresh. O'Brien convincingly shows the connections between Yeats' poetry and his politics and rejects the view you can separate the two. He effectively demolishes the argument that Yeats' politics was "just Maud Gonne." Yeats' involvement in Irish politics predated his association with the beautiful and erratic actress. O'Brien broadly accepts Orwell's argument that Yeats' best poetry was written during his most politically reactionary period. I would go a step further—it was precisely when he was least intimately involved in political issues that his most lasting poetry was written, i.e. "To A Shade," in 1913 or his celebrations of 1916 published four years later or his last great poetry written in the 1930s during his flirtation with fascism.

O'Brien shows how the Irish Civil War taught the Protestant elite the great



## Book Marks

virtues of the middle class Catholic government that emerged during the Free State. As Yeats turned against the masses, what he called "the gutter," he came to rely more and more on "a despotism of the educated classes," a term that included the Catholic middle class. This to O'Brien explains Yeats' brief but genuine flirtation with fascism in the 1930s. As O'Brien notes, it is difficult for some literary types to accept the view that the greatest poet of the 20th century was a crypto-fascist. Like Orwell, whom he resembles in many ways, O'Brien is not averse to swallowing his political leanings even when the result is distasteful.

The other essays in this collection vary in quality. The best are those dealing with Irish themes and a long piece originally written for the *New Republic* on South Africa. Here O'Brien's flair for the fresh and the unpredictable shows through. He knows the Irish scene intimately and his writing avoids fashionable or trendy themes. An essay on Bobby Sands buries a simplistic view of Irish nationalism and the Northern issue particularly popular in the United States, i.e. that Great Britain is responsible for every ill in Ireland and that if the Irish were just left alone they would solve their sectarian quarrel. O'Brien shows how the Bobby Sands syndrome reflected the need for a sacrifice by a certain strand of extreme nationalism, what he calls "a sort of hereditary priesthood of blood." These fanatics, he says, have brought the 17th century and its hatreds alive again. O'Brien is pessimistic that the Anglo-Irish Agreement of cooperation of 1985 will resolve the differences between the communi-

ties in Ireland. In a sense he is back where he was 17 years ago in *States of Ireland* when he could see no rational resolution of the Northern crisis. Nationalism joined with religious fanaticism had already poisoned the well of compromise.

In 1985 O'Brien and his adopted black son, Patrick, traveled to South Africa to give a series of lectures at various Universities before integrated audiences—a good liberal plan. For their efforts the two were reviled for breaking the academic boycott of South Africa favored by African nationalists and their leftist sympathizers in Europe and the United States. The O'Briens were labeled tools of apartheid for their efforts. But they felt it was important not to isolate South African moderates and to open its society to outsiders because only then would this crazed society begin to change. When challenged for failing to honor the academic boycott O'Brien gave the classic liberal response: "it is precisely because I was a liberal that I was against the academic boycott." Again, like Orwell, O'Brien will have nothing to do with the latest cause of the "smelly little orthodoxies." He may call himself a socialist but at his core he is a part of the radical tradition that is as old as Cobbett and Hazlitt.

The remainder of the collection falls off rapidly in quality. An analysis of terrorism adds little to our knowledge or insight on this unpleasant fact of modern life. He has a few interesting observations to make about modern Zionism but nothing as original about the middle eastern crisis comparable to his views of the Irish issue. A long essay on



## Book Marks

Nicaragua, the result of a visit in 1986, is one of the weakest essays in the collection along with a tendentious essay on Pope John Paul II, who both attracts and repels O'Brien. The Irish anti-cleric wins out here. O'Brien's sympathy with the Sandinista revolution and a veneer of anti-Americanism undermines any value his Nicaraguan essay might have. The worst part of this essay is an attempt to rationalize the Sandinista treatment of the Pope during his visit in 1986, including an effort to shout him down during a celebration of Mass, an effort which O'Brien argues was largely spontaneous.

O'Brien is opinionated in the manner of the finest essayists, but in his best work he tries to get the reader to re-think his ideas. He respects his audience and doesn't pander to it. Again like Orwell, he is a non-doctrinaire socialist but no neo-Marxist puppet. He is unpredictable like Orwell and Dwight Macdonald and seems happiest flailing away at the pet crochets of his own allies. He is at his best on Irish matters, a point he first demonstrated 28 years ago in his seminal scholarly study, *Par-nell and His Party*, which swept aside all previous work on that Irish icon. O'Brien's Irish essays, including his journalism, could be republished by him without embarrassment and with few changes, a comment on both his originality and his objectivity—no easy feat for one writing about Ireland over the past forty years. His other writings may be flawed but they are always worth a read. How many other authors can you say that about?



Elmer Andrews

### *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: All the Realms of Whisper.*

New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988.  
219 pp.

Reviewed by  
Stephen Smith

The loop of a snowshoe hangs  
on a wall  
in my head, in a room that is  
drift-still:  
it is like a brushed longhand  
character,  
a hieroglyph for all the realms of  
whisper.

The last five words of this quotation from Seamus Heaney's "Shelf Life" provide the sub-title of this critical survey of Heaney's first seven volumes of poetry—all but *The Haw Lantern*, published after Andrews' book had gone to press. This perceptive study of Ireland's most highly regarded poet reminds us once again of the cyclical nature of the Irish poet's artistic crisis; just as Yeats had struggled with the temptation to allow his muse to serve political ends—"I think it better that in times like these/ A poet's mouth be silent"—so Heaney resists the strictures of Seamus Deane and others to write a more activist verse in the midst of the latest incarnation of the Troubles. Andrews explores the resultant split in Heaney's temperament and work without falling into the pitfalls of the too-easy, yet inevitable, Yeatsian comparisons, choosing instead to examine Heaney's poetry as an on-



## Book Marks

going attempt to resolve what Heaney himself calls the "technique" and the "craft": "the divining, vatic, oracular function" of poetry and the "making function."

From this initial dichotomy, Andrews spins out a series of complementary antitheses that inform Heaney's poetry. He associates "technique" with the figure of Antaeus in *North*. Instinctual, feminine, artesian in his link with the deep fount of poetic intuition, Antaeus represents the assuaging principle in Heaney's verse, the sensuous power of words to capture intimations of an unconscious, pre-verbal world. Hercules, on the other hand, a figure in the same volume, represents "craft," the rational, masculine, architectonic counterpart to Antaeus. These two extremes represent, for Andrews, two poles of thought and feeling whose synthesis remains an elusive goal of Heaney's work:

One of Heaney's major concerns is to evolve a poetry which will unite the extremes of Hercules and Antaeus, the explicit and the symbolic, humanism and atavism.

Once Andrews establishes this central duality in Heaney's poetry—a duality which branches out to include the public world and the private vision, the domain of political violence and the field of domestic feeling, rational humanism and the "realms of whisper"—he uses it as a touchstone for evaluating Heaney's poetic achievement at various stages of his career. For example, he finds the first two volumes, *Death of a Naturalist*

and *Door Into the Dark*, too masculine, "more involved with finding words than with that crucial, pre-verbal, feminine activity" of technique. The younger Heaney is cursed with too much craft at the expense of pure vision. In contrast, Andrews admires later poems such as "La Toilette" in *Station Island*, which he describes as "a poetry composed out of a self-engendering, self-delighting musical system that would be the proper expression of the poet's inner freedom" a freedom achieved through Heaney's eventual ability to internalize conflict as Yeats had done before him.

Andrews' analysis of Heaney's poetry provides a balanced overview of Heaney's work thus far by giving it a shape and a direction which allow us to appreciate both the continuity and the imaginative leaps of Heaney's evolving verse. The author is often at his best, however, not so much in his broad theorizing as in his finely nuanced analysis of individual poems. He brings a necessary gift to an appreciation of the typical Heaney poem: an ear finely turned to the subtle modulations of Heaney's verbal music.



An Essay by  
JOHN KEENAN

## *Paddy*

Every child ought to know at least one true eccentric while growing up. Taken in small doses, eccentricity is liberating, freeing the young mind from the hobgoblins of consistency and conformity. I would like to have known Henry David Thoreau when I was a boy, but I will happily settle for Paddy Lagan.

Among the Irish who peopled my youth, Paddy was considered "a bit odd," but he was revered nonetheless as the man who had hid de Valera when that Irish patriot escaped to the States. To me he was mysterious, funny, scary, and different from all others in my world. I loved to see him come to our door.

It must have taken courage for my mother to open the door to this unusual looking visitor. Even in those Depression-ridden days, Paddy looked poorer than most. His clothes ignored the seasons: panama hat in the winter, wool cap in the summer. He must have shaved once a week at most. His face was lined (I trust with age not dirt) and his thick eyebrows dominated his face. Deepset eyes lurked under the brows. Never focusing on the people present in the room, they looked beyond the present distractions, whether into the past or future I never knew.

His voice haunts me still, though I puzzle at how to describe it to you. If his appearance did not make you wonder about his sanity, his voice would certainly do so. It was high-pitched and musical in its range, slow and chant-like, and, like his eyes, seemed to be undirected toward any specific hearer. At the age of five, it struck me as the stuff of nightmares, yet I could not tear myself away from the fascination of this person and voice like no other in my life.

I cannot remember when I first saw him, but he is associated in my mind with our radio, that central point in our living room and in my imaginative life. I knew him first only as Lagan, the name my mother and father used in referring to him. "Lagan's coming over tonight to put up the aerial for the radio." And another time: "Did you hear they arrested Lagan? Them cops won't forget him in a hurry. I hear he refused to leave the jail in the morning until they gave him breakfast."

When I learned to read, I saw his true name on the handmade calendar he made for us each year. There was a small picture of an Irish plant or hawthorne tree pasted neatly to a stiff piece of dark green cardboard. Often there was a short typed bit of verse under the picture with the name *Padraic Lagan* at the end. Under this verse, a tiny calendar from Woolworth's was pasted with precision. This annual gift was delivered at Christmas. I say "delivered," but I never saw him give it to my parents. It was just there after he left.

I waited for Lagan's visits with a mix of anticipation and fear. Things happened when he came. He arrived without notice in his Model A Ford, which he had painted bright green with his paint brush. The time was mid-Depres-

sion 1930's, and the car stood out. Hardly anyone I knew had a car, and no one had one that made such a clear statement of its owner's nationalism.

The back seat was irresistible to a small boy's curiosity. From the window I could see radios with naked vacuum tubes showing, wires that had to lead somewhere, parts of lawn mowers, burlap bags holding who knows what? Small boys perhaps. I had to look. I gave in and opened the car door.

I screamed. A cat jumped out of the car and ran past me into Never-Never Land. I had to confess all, and that is how I became forevermore known to Lagan only as "the man who lost the cat." If I meet Lagan in heaven or elsewhere, I know what greeting to expect.

Paddy liked cats. They too were mysterious and unpredictable. There is a cat in one of my favorite Lagan stories.

As I heard the story, Paddy went to Washington. I suppose he drove the Model A, which must have set D.C. traffic back a century at least. Like a good tourist, he stood in line at the White House. When he got to the entrance, he was stopped by a guard. The guard knew a suspicious person when he saw one.

"You can't take that bag on the tour," the guard said. "You'll have to check it here."

Lagan turned on the full deep set gaze of innocence. In a voice that must have marked him as crazy or retarded in the guard's view, he chanted, "Ah now, it's my bag and there's nothin' harmful in it. But I won't be giving it up to you."

Security leaped into action. They pulled him out of the line. "What's in the bag, fella? Something you don't want us to see?" Lagan looked hurt and put his chin on his chest in meditative silence.

"Open it up or we'll open it for you," said the voices of authority. No reply. Someone snatched the cheap suitcase from the old man's hand and snapped it open. Surprise! No bomb. Just an orange tabby who leaped to freedom and ran up the stairs of the White House, the might and power of the United States of America in pursuit.

What happened to the cat? I never heard, but I will use a writer's license to presume that it ended up in the family quarters and was adopted by Bess and Harry Truman. Bess named the cat Paddy, just because the name came to her and seemed to suit.

Lagan was a bit of an anarchist, I suppose. He grew up fighting the authority of the British in Ireland, and he didn't much care for anyone telling him what he must do. His dress and way of life occasionally conflicted with the expectations of the authorities.

Imagine you are a cop on Philadelphia's Main Line. You see an ancient green Ford moving slowly through the streets of the wealthiest neighborhoods. The driver is obviously not from the neighborhood. He has long hair, a dirty tweed cap, and a four-day growth of beard. You stop him for questioning and he gives you trouble. He will not answer a question directly. He looks off into space and asks you were your parents Irish or do you know the Keenans of Bryn Mawr. The back of the car is full of radios and God knows what all (probably stolen property) and you haul him in for questioning.

The questioning at the station house defies imagination. I suppose some sympathetic detective with a sense of humor finally realized that Lagan was playing, but since he lacked proper identification, they locked him up overnight until they could verify his story that he fixed radios, not stole them. So Paddy got to spend the night in jail. He later said he liked it. A better bed than he had at home. Never had a better night's sleep. Until of course they woke him early in the morning and said he was free to go. Lagan protested fiercely. He was entitled to breakfast and he would not consider leaving without it. He got breakfast and a good story to tell.

I liked to hear my folks talk about Lagan, though in my early years I was pleasantly frightened of him. After all, I was the man who lost the cat. There was a time when he said he would take me away in a burlap bag as a fair trade for the lost cat. He usually said the bag was in his car (God, hadn't I seen it there!) but once he brought the bag into the house. There was much talk about whether I would fit and so on, and my 35-year old cousin had to get in the bag first to see if I would fit. And then Lagan said the both of us would fit well and I ran to the kitchen and hid.

What a terrible thing to frighten a child! The man must have been demented. My psychiatrist will hear of this. But in truth I loved being scared, and I seemed to sense that this was a wonderful game. My mother was there laughing and Lagan was making funny sounds of clucking and oohing and aahing but never of laughing. A true comic never laughs at his own humor.

My mother always told me that he was "a very smart man, an educated man." "When de Valera came to this country on the run from the English, it was Lagan who hid him. He was a friend of de Valera's," my mother told me proudly when I was sixteen or so. I knew that Eamon de Valera was at that moment the Prime Minister of the Irish Free State, but I found it hard to picture such an important man in the company of Paddy Lagan. I was just beginning to learn through my acquaintance with Lagan that the truth is not always what it appears to be on the surface.

In my first year of college, I discovered the writers of the Celtic Renaissance. I was reading Yeats and Synge and Lady Gregory and feeling pride in my Irish heritage. Lagan's visits were less frequent now, so I practically attacked him with questions when he finally appeared one afternoon.

"Were you in Dublin when Synge's *Playboy* was produced? I read that there were riots at the Abbey."

"The Abbey," he said. (Was that scorn I heard in the voice?) "Sure there were no riots at all. We were just having a bit of fun. A few tomatoes thrown maybe, and some yelling, but no riots at all."

"You were *there*?" I said in total disbelief. "But why would someone like you be rioting against a Synge play?" He almost smiled. "Aagh, I think it was because he didn't show us all as saints and scholars."

Paddy never talked politics in our house. I knew that he was a patriot devoted to a free Ireland, but my parents only became upset by the troubles at home and afraid for their families. I think now that his participation in the Abbey riots was political, not literary. The Abbey was associated in the minds of young Irish rebels with the English, the Protestants, and the Establishment.

He often came to our house on Christmas Eve with “a little treat.” Asking for a shot glass, he poured whiskey into it while holding the glass up to the light and extending his arm over the polished surface of our dining room table. In a virtuoso performance, he poured until the amber liquor came to the very top of the glass, forming a convex curve at the top. My mother watched in horror as the only treasured piece of furniture in the house stood in jeopardy. But he never spilled a drop over the table; my mother spilled it on the floor as he extended the glass to her.

As I grew older, I looked forward to Lagan’s now infrequent visits for a different reason. Here was a man who wrote. Here was a man who had known first hand many of the people and events I had only read about in the history books. Here was a man who proclaimed his own independence, living alone and in his own style, not in the conventions of society. I wanted to make him a romantic figure, but Padraic Lagan would not let himself be used—not even by me. He resisted my personal questions as he had resisted the cops’—offering me digressions and stories instead of talking about his role in hiding de Valera or his activities in resisting the British.

Only when we talked of poetry did we really converse. I learned then that my Paddy Lagan was the Padraic Lagan who had written the poems on the little green calendars. By some coincidence I had seen his name on poems displayed at an Irish exhibition. Lagan was a published poet!

I have seen only a few of his poems, and I have none of them in my possession anymore. I remember them as lyric and romantic. But it was not Lagan’s poetry that made a lasting impression on me. It was his life. He didn’t write political columns or man the barricades, but he took charge of his life and made it *his*. He knew what freedom meant and insisted that it was there to be used.

I’m glad Paddy was part of my growing up; he taught me early in life a simple truth: people are not always what they appear to be.







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DAVID McSHANE, a recent graduate of La Salle, contributes his second cover to *Four Quarters*. He previously did the portrait of Joyce Carol Oates for the Fall 1988 issue.

EILEÁN NÍ CHILLEANÁIN has published five volumes of poetry, co-edits the literary magazine *Cyphers*, and teaches at Trinity College, Dublin.

HUGH O'DONNELL, a Salesian priest in Dublin, recently returned to Ireland after a year at Berkeley. He won the John Player Award in the William

Allingham poetry competition in Ballyshannon.

JOHN ROSSI, Professor of History at La Salle, continues to serve as Associate Editor of this magazine. His most recent Irish essay combines two loves: "Glimpses of the Irish Contribution to Early Baseball," in *Eire/Ireland*, Summer, 1988.

STEPHEN P. SMITH is an Assistant Professor of English at La Salle. His article on the autobiography of Hugh MacDiarmid will soon appear in a volume of essays on MacDiarmid's life and work.

EITHNE STRONG, a novelist and poet, has published poetry in Irish and English. The mother of nine, she has combined writing and teaching and now lives in Monkstown, outside of Dublin.





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(ISSN-0015-9107)

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Phila., Pa. 19141-1199

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